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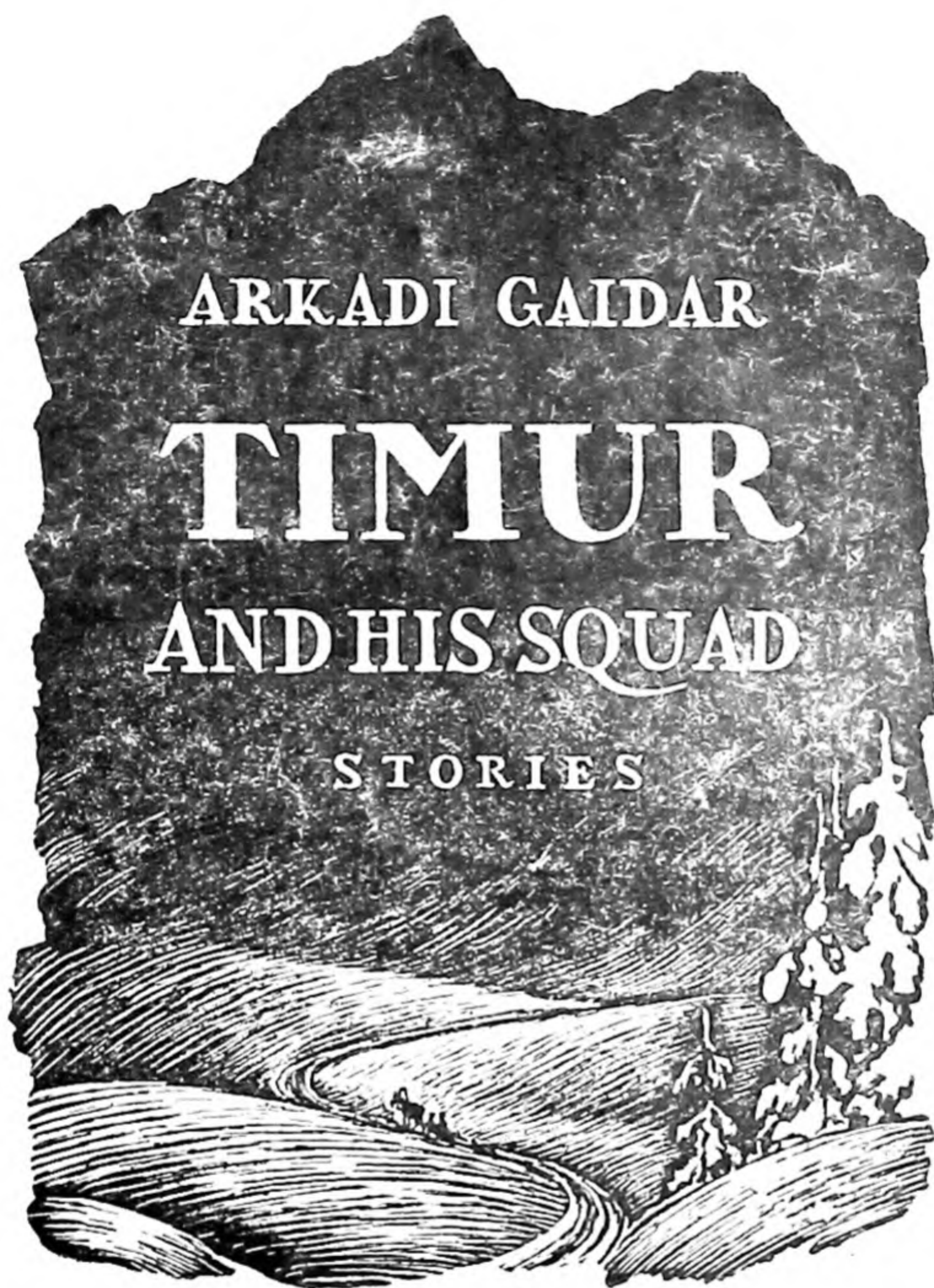
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ARKADI GAIDAR

**TIMUR**  
AND HIS SQUAD

STORIES



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ARKADI GAIDAR

T I M U R

*AND*

HIS SQUAD

STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
PUBLISHING HOUSE  
MOSCOW

1948

*Translated from the Russian by Lucy Flaxman*  
*Edited by Leonard Stoklitsky*

*Gen. 17*

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## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
SCHOOL	7
I. School	9
II. Happy Times	85
III. The Front	160
CHUCK AND GECK	333
THE BLUE CUP	385
TIMUR AND HIS SQUAD	429

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# SCHOOL



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# S C H O O L.

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## *Chapter One*

**M**Y HOME town of Arzamas was a quiet, green little place, a town of gardens. Behind their rickety fences grew a great number of cherry and apple trees, berry bushes and red peonies. The gardens merged with one another to form a sea of green, noisy with the incessant chirruping of tomtits, goldfinches, bullfinches and robins.

Green, stagnant ponds, in which all the self-respecting fish had died long ago, trailed through the town past the gardens; only slimy eels and inedible little anglers lived in the ponds. At the foot of the hill trickled the tiny Tesha River.

With its thirty churches and four monasteries, the town was very like a monastery itself. We had many miracle-working icons in Arzamas. As a matter of fact, there seemed to be more miracle-working icons than plain ones. But somehow very few miracles occurred in our town. Perhaps this was because the famous Sarov Monastery, with its patron saints, was situated some sixty kilometres away, and the patron saints lured all the miracles to that place.

Time and again we heard that in Sarov a blind man had regained his sight, a cripple had begun to walk, a hunchback had straightened up. But nothing of the kind ever happened at our icons.

Once we heard tell that Mitka the Gypsy, a vagrant and a notorious drunkard who used to immerse himself in the river through a hole in the ice at Epiphany every year for a bottle of vodka, had had a vision, and that he had given up drinking, had repented, and was to take the vows at the Monastery of Our Saviour. People rushed to the monastery in droves. Sure enough, Mitka was standing there by the choir bowing zealously to the ground and repenting loudly of his sins; he actually confessed that the year before he had stolen merchant Bebeshin's goat and swapped it for vodka. Merchant Bebeshin was so moved he gave Mitka a silver ruble to buy a candle for the salvation of his soul. Many were the tears then shed at the sight of a sinful man forsaking the road to ruin for the straight and narrow path of righteousness.

This went on for a whole week, but just before taking the vows Mitka must have had some vision to the opposite effect, or perhaps something else happened; at any rate, he did not turn up in church. And then whispers went about among the members of the congregation that

Mitka lay sprawled in a ditch on Novoplotinnaya Street with an empty vodka bottle beside him.

Deacon Pafnuti and merchant Sinyugin, the churchwarden, were sent to the scene of the disaster to reason with Mitka, but they soon returned, declaring indignantly that Mitka indeed was as dead to the world as a slaughtered cow; a second empty half-pint already lay by his side, and when they finally managed to rouse him, he cursed and said that he had changed his mind about taking the vows because he was sinful and unworthy.

Our little town was a quiet and patriarchal sort of place. Before holidays, especially around Easter, when the bells of all thirty churches began to peal, the din that rose over the town could be heard distinctly in villages within a radius of twenty kilometres.

The bell of the Church of the Annunciation drowned out all the others. The bell of the Monastery of Our Saviour was cracked, and it clanged spasmodically in a hoarse bass. The shrill bells of the Monastery of St. Nicholas tinkled away in a high key. These three main bells were backed up by all the others; even the bleak little prison church huddled at the edge of town joined in the general discordant chorus.

I used to love to climb up the belfries. We boys were allowed to do this only at Easter. You

wound up and up the dark, narrow stairway for what seemed hours. In the stone niches pigeons softly cooed. The endless turns would make you slightly dizzy. From the top you had a view of the whole town, with its patchwork of straggling ponds and its maze of gardens. At the foot of the hill lay the Tesha, the old mill, Goat Island, a copse and, farther out, gullies and the dark blue fringe of the municipal forest.

My father was a private in the 12th Siberian Rifle Regiment, which was stationed on the Riga sector of the German front.

I was in my second year at the polytechnical school. My mother, a trained nurse, was always busy, and I was left to my own devices. Once a week I brought my report card home to her. She would glance over the card and shake her head when she saw a low mark for drawing or penmanship.

"What's this?"

"That's not my fault, Ma. Can I help it if I haven't any talent for drawing? I drew a horse, Ma, and he said it was a pig. The next time I showed him my drawing I said it was a pig, but he got angry and said it wasn't a pig, or a horse either, but heaven knows what. I don't intend to be an artist anyway, Ma."

"Well, and what's the matter with your penmanship? Let me see your notebook. Goodness

me, what a mess! A blot on every line, and a squashed cockroach between the pages! Fie, how sloppy!"

"About the blot, Ma, that just happened, but about the cockroach it isn't my fault at all. Honest, I don't know why you have to make such a fuss! You don't think I put that cockroach there on purpose, do you? The fool crawled in there himself and got squashed, and I get the blame! Penmanship too — as if it really matters! I don't intend to be a writer anyway."

"What do you intend to be?" Mother inquired sternly, signing the report card. "A blockhead? Why does the inspector write again that you've been climbing up the fire-escape to the roof of the school? What did you do that for? Are you learning to be a chimney sweep?"

"No. I don't want to be an artist, or a writer, or a chimney sweep either. I'm going to be a sailor."

"A sailor? Whatever for?" Mother was really puzzled this time.

"A sailor and nothing but! Gee, Ma, can't you see what fun it is?"

Mother shook her head.

"Well, of all things! See you don't bring any more bad marks home, or being a sailor won't save you from a spanking."

What a fibber! Spank me? Never! Once she locked me up in the storeroom, but then the whole next day she fed me patties, and she gave me twenty kopeks to go to the movies. Just give me more punishment like that!

## *Chapter Two*

One morning, when I dashed off to school after gulping down my tea and grabbing up my books, I met that fidgety little fellow Timka Shtukin, my classmate, on the way.

Timka Shtukin was as harmless and good-natured as they come. You could whack him on the head and he wouldn't even squeak. He willingly gobbled down the remains of our sandwiches and ran out to the corner shop for rolls for our lunches; he always shivered with fear when our homeroom teacher approached him, even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

Timka had one great passion — birds. The little lodge at the cemetery church, where he and his father, who was watchman, lived, was cluttered with bird cages. He used to buy, sell and exchange songbirds, and he caught them himself with clapnets and traps.

Once his father gave it to him hot: it seems that merchant Sinyugin visited the cemetery and

found some hempseeds and a bow-shaped net laid out on his grandmother's gravestone.

Sinyugin complained to the watchman, who gave Timka a hiding. And at our next bible class Father Gennadi said reprovngly:

"Gravestones are set up in memory of the deceased, and not for any other purpose, and to place traps and sundry other contraptions on gravestones is improper, sinful and blasphemous."

He followed this up with a few instances from the history of mankind when similar blasphemy had invoked the terrible wrath of Heaven upon the head of the culprit.

It must be said that Father Gennadi was a wizard at citing examples. I'm sure that if he were to find out that I, for instance, had gone to the movies the week before without permission, he would have fished about in his memory and doubtlessly found a case in history when a person who had committed a similar crime had had deserved punishment meted out to him from on high while yet on this side of the grave.

Timka was walking along whistling in imitation of a thrush. When he saw me he winked in greeting and at the same time glanced distrustfully at me to see whether I was coming up toward him just like that or with some trick up my sleeve.

"Timka!" I said. "We'll be late for class."

Honest, cross my heart, we will. We still might make the class — but it's a sure thing we'll be late to prayers."

"Maybe they won't notice it," he quavered.

"Sure they will. So what? They'll only make us stay in after school, that's all." I teased him with studied indifference, knowing how afraid he was of receiving reprimands.

Timka quailed. He began to walk faster, and said plaintively:

"But it ain't my fault, really. Pa went off to open up the church. He told me to stay home for a minute — and then forgot to come back. All because of the service. Valka Spagin's mother had a service for him."

"How do you mean for him?" I gaped. "Do you mean . . . he's dead?"

"No, this wasn't a burial service; it's to find him."

"Find him?" My voice began to tremble. "What are you talking about, Timka? You better look out or I'll smack you one. . . . Listen, Timka, I wasn't in school yesterday, I was running a temperature."

"Ping-ping . . . ta-ra-rah . . . tu-u. . . ." Timka whistled the tomtit's tune and hopped on one foot in glee because I knew nothing about the affair.

"That's right, you weren't in school yesterday. Oh boy, if you only knew what happened! . . ."

"Well, for heaven's sake, what *did* happen?"

"It's like this. We were sitting there in class yesterday — our first class was French. The witch was making us do the '*être*' verbs — you know: *Les verbes aller, arriver, entrer, rester, tomber....* She called Rayevsky to the blackboard and he'd just written '*rester, tomber*' when the door opened and the inspector (Timka screwed up his eyes), the principal (Timka glanced at me significantly) and the homeroom teacher came in. When we sat down the principal said: 'Young men, a misfortune has occurred: your classmate Spagin has run away from home. He left a note saying that he had gone off to the German front. I cannot believe that he did this without the knowledge of his comrades. Many of you, of course, must have been advised of his plan beforehand, but nobody had the good grace to inform me of it. Young men, I' — and he went on and on for half an hour at least."

I could only gasp. So that was it! Such an event, such astonishing news, and I'd sat at home making believe I was sick, and didn't know a thing! And nobody, not even Yashka Tsukkerstein or Fedka Bashmakov, had thought of coming around after school to tell me about it. Call them comrades after that! When Fedka needed cork stoppers for his toy pistol he came to me all right. But when I wanted him most — catch him com-

ing! Half the school could have run off to the front, and me sitting at home like a fool!

I burst into school like a whirlwind, tore off my coat on the run, dodged the superintendent and mingled with the crowd of boys coming out of the auditorium, where prayers had been held.

During the next few days all we could talk about was Valka Spagin's heroic flight.

The principal was mistaken in thinking that any of us had been initiated into Spagin's plan. Nobody at all had known about it. Nobody had even had an inkling that Valka Spagin might run away. He was such a quiet little fellow, he never joined in any of our fights or our raids on apple orchards, his pants were always falling down — in a word, he was a regular sissy, and then suddenly to do a thing like that!

We began to question one another to learn if anybody had noticed Valka making preparations to run away. After all, a fellow couldn't simply pick himself up and set out for the front.

Fedka Bashmakov recalled that he had seen a railroad map at Valka's place.

Dubilov, who was in the same class the second year, said that a few days before he had seen Valka in a store buying a battery for his pocket flashlight. But no matter how we tried, we could not get another detail out of anyone.

The class was wild with excitement. We all acted like raving lunatics. We gave the wrong answers to the teachers' questions, and twice as many boys as usual were kept after school. A few days later came another piece of staggering news: Mitka Tupikov, a first-year pupil, had run away.

The school authorities became alarmed in earnest.

"Today at bible class," Fedka told me confidentially, "Father'll talk about runaways. I took the notebooks into the teachers' room and heard them talking about it."

Father Gennadi, our priest, was about seventy years old. You couldn't see his face at all for his beard and eyebrows. He was so fat he had to turn all the way around to look over his shoulder, because he had no neck to speak of.

He was very popular among the boys. We could do anything we liked at his lessons: play cards, draw, or read forbidden books like Nat Pinkerton and Sherlock Holmes instead of the Old Testament, for Father Gennadi was near-sighted.

Father Gennadi entered the room, raised his hand in benediction, and at once the monitor blared:

"Blessed be the Lord in Heaven...."

Father Gennadi was hard of hearing, and generally insisted on prayers being said in a loud, distinct voice, but even he felt that the monitor was overdoing it. He waved his hand and growled:

"Now, now! What's this? Say it in a decent voice and stop bellowing like a bull."

Father Gennadi began in a roundabout way. First he told us the parable of the prodigal son. This son, as I understood it then, had left his father's home to wander about, but it seems he had a lean time of it and so he finally repented.

Then he told us the parable of the talents: how a master gave his slaves some money, which was called talents, and how some of the slaves began to trade and make profit, and others hid their money away and made nothing.

"And the moral of these parables?" Father Gennadi continued. "The first is about a disobedient son. This son ran away from his father and wandered about for a long time, only to return to the shelter of his parents' roof. Take your comrades, now, who have not experienced any of life's trials and tribulations, and who left their homes secretly — is there any need to point out that they will meet with disaster on their ruinous path? I urge you once again: if any of you know where they are, write to them and tell them not to be afraid to return home while there still is

time. And remember, the parable says that when the prodigal son returned, his father in his kindness did not reprove him but clothed him in fine raiment and killed the fatted calf in his honour, as on a holiday. Thus, too, will the parents of these two erring youths forgive them and receive them with open arms."

I had my doubts about that. As far as Tupikov was concerned, I couldn't tell how his parents would receive him, but I knew for certain that instead of killing the fatted calf on his son's return, Spagin the baker would simply give him a good flogging.

"As for the parable of the talents," Father Gennadi went on, "it tells us that we must not bury our talents. You are being taught all sorts of sciences here. Upon finishing school each of you will choose a profession to fit his abilities, calling and position. One of you will become, say, a respectable businessman, another — a doctor, a third — an official. Everyone will hold you in esteem and think to himself: 'Yes, this worthy man has not buried his talents but multiplied them, and now he is deservedly enjoying the good things of life.' But what," here Father Gennadi despairingly raised his arms heavenward, "what, I ask you, will become of these boys and other runaways who ignore the advantages offered them and leave home to go

in search of adventures disastrous to body and soul? You are growing like delicate flowers in the hothouse of a painstaking gardener; you know not the tempests or troubles of life, and are blossoming forth serenely to the joy of your teachers. And they — even if they do manage to pass unscathed through all the adversities awaiting them, they will grow up untended, like the wild thornbush that is windswept and covered with the dust of the wayside."

When Father Gennadi, august and exalted like a prophet, slowly sailed out of our room and into the teachers' room, I drew a deep breath, reflected, and then said:

"Fedka!"

"Ho?"

"What do you think about those talents?"

"Nothing much. What do you think?"

"Me?"

I faltered, and then added in a quieter voice:

"You know, Fedka, I think I'd bury those talents too. Who wants to be a businessman or an official anyway?"

"Me too," Fedka admitted after a moment's hesitation. "What's so swell about growing up in a hothouse? Spit on a flower and it'll wilt. And a thornbush'll stand anything — rain or shine."

"Fedka," I said, "but what about those words of Father's: 'And you'll answer in the future life.' Future life or not, just the same I don't feel like answering."

Fedka thought it over. It was clear that he did not see a way of escaping the promised punishment either. He tossed his head and replied evasively:

"Shucks, that's a long way off. And by that time we might think up something."

Young Tupikov turned out to be an awful dunce. He didn't even know which way to run to get to the front, and was caught three days later sixty kilometres away from Arzamas heading for Nizhni Novgorod.

They say they made a big fuss over him at home and bought him lots of presents. After making him promise solemnly that he'd never run away again, his mother said she'd buy him a Monte Cristo gun the following summer. But at school the kids laughed and made fun of Tupikov: "We like that!" they said. "A lot of us wouldn't mind skipping out of town for three days to get a real gun for a present."

The calling down Tupikov got from Malinovsky, our geography teacher, whom we had nicknamed "Kolya the Madman," came as a complete surprise to him.

Malinovsky called Tupikov to the blackboard.

"Hem! Tell me, young man, which front were you intending to run off to? The Japanese, what?"

"No," replied Tupikov, reddening. "The German."

"Hem!" Malinovsky continued derisively. "May I ask you, in that case, why the dickens you had to head toward Nizhni Novgorod? Where are your brains, and in which cranny of the aforementioned have you stuffed away my geography lessons? Isn't it clear as day that you should have made for Moscow," he prodded the map with his pointer, "and then via Smolensk and Brest, if you intended to run off to the German front? Yet you hiked off in exactly the opposite direction — to the east. What made you go that way? I've been trying to teach you to apply your knowledge in practice and not to stuff it away in your head like in a garbage pail, to be forgotten. Sit down. I'm giving you 'Poor.' Shame on you, young man!"

I should note here that after this speech it suddenly dawned on all the first-year pupils that knowledge could come in very handy, and they began to study geography with absolutely astounding diligence. They even invented a new game called "Runaway." The game consisted in one of the participants naming a **border town**, and another calling out the main points through which one had to pass to get to it.

If the runaway erred he paid a forfeit, and if the forfeit was not forthcoming he received a whack on the head or a flick on the nose, depending on the rules laid down.

### *Chapter Three*

Once a week, on Wednesdays, we attended solemn prayers for victory in the auditorium before classes.

After prayers everybody turned to the left to face the portraits of the tsar and tsarina.

The choir then sang the anthem, "God Save Our Tsar," and everybody joined in. I used to sing at the top of my voice. My voice was not exactly made for singing, but I tried so hard that even the superintendent once remarked:

"Gorikov, tone down a bit, will you? You're overdoing it."

I was hurt. What did he mean, "overdoing it?" If I didn't have any talent for singing did that mean I ought to let the others pray for victory and keep my own mouth shut?

I complained to Mother about it when I got home.

But somehow she wasn't very interested in my hurt feelings.

"You're too little yet," she said. "First grow

up. . . . They're fighting out there all right, but what's it got to do with you?"

"What's it got to do with me? Suppose the Germans beat us? I've read something about those atrocities of theirs, Ma. Why are the Germans so cruel they don't take pity on anybody — not even old women and children — and why does our tsar take pity on everybody?"

"Sit still!" Mother snapped. "They're all fine ones! Carrying on like madmen — and the Germans are no worse than others, including ourselves."

Mother went out, leaving me completely baffled: what did she mean by saying that the Germans weren't any worse than ourselves? How could she say they weren't any worse when they were worse? I'd been to the movies and seen how the Germans burnt everything down without mercy — they destroyed the Rheims Cathedral and desecrated the churches, while we weren't destroying or desecrating anything. Just the opposite, even. Didn't I see with my own eyes at the movies how a Russian officer rescued a German baby from a fire? I went over to Fedka's.

Fedka agreed with me.

"Of course they're savages. They sank the *Lusitania* with all its peaceful passengers on board, and we haven't sunk anything. Our tsar and the English tsar are noble. And the

French president too. But their Wilhelm is a skunk!"

"Fedka, why is the French tsar called a president?"

Fedka reflected.

"I don't know," he replied. "I've heard their president isn't a tsar but just an ordinary man."

"How do you mean, just an ordinary man?"

"Honest, I don't know. You see, I read a book by Dumas. It's a swell book — full of adventures. And in that book it says that the Frenchmen killed their tsar, and ever since they've had a president instead of a tsar."

"How could they do that — kill their tsar!" I said indignantly. "You're lying, Fedka, or else you've got it all mixed up."

"Honest, cross my heart, they killed him. They killed him, and his wife too. They tried them in court and sentenced them to death."

"Go on, that sounds too fishy. How can anybody take a tsar to court? Look at our judge, Ivan Fyodorovich. He tries burglars. He tried the fellow who broke Plyushchikha's fence, and he tried Mitka the Gypsy when he swiped a crate of wafers from the monks. But he don't dare try the tsar because the tsar is on top of everybody."

"Well, if you don't believe me you don't have to," Fedka retorted angrily. "Wait till Sashka

Goloveshkin finishes the book. Then I'll let you read it. They didn't have Ivan Fyodorovich's kind of trials. Over there all the people got together and tried them — and then they executed them!" he snapped. "I even remember how they executed them. They don't hang people over there but they have a sort of machine — a guillotine it's called. They wind it up, it goes whi-i-i-zz — and off comes the head."

"And they cut off the tsar's head?"

"The tsar's and the tsarina's and other people's too. Do you want me to bring the book over? You read it, it's good. It tells about a monk — he was foxy as anything, and fat, and pretended to be holy, only he really wasn't. The part about him made me laugh fit to burst — Ma got real angry at me. She jumped out of bed and blew out my lamp, but I waited until she fell asleep and then took down the little icon lamp and started reading again."

\*

Rumours got about that Austrian prisoners of war had been brought up to our railroad station. Fedka and I rushed over there straight from school. The station was quite a way from town. We had to run past the cemetery, through the copse, along the highway and cross a long, winding gully.

"What do you think, Fedka?" I asked. "Will the prisoners be in chains?"

"How do I know? Maybe. Otherwise they could escape. But in chains you can't go far. Ever see how convicts are taken to jail? They can hardly move their legs."

"Those convicts are nothing but robbers, but these prisoners didn't steal anything."

Fedka screwed up his eyes.

"Do you think only people who steal or kill are put in prison? No sirree, they're put there for all sorts of things!"

"For what sorts of things?"

"Well, what do you think the carpentry teacher was put in jail for? You don't know? Well, don't talk then."

The fact that Fedka knew more than I did always made me angry. No matter what you asked him about — except lessons, of course — he was sure to know something. I suppose he got to know things from his father. His father was a mailman, and mailmen pick up all sorts of news on their rounds.

The kids had all liked the carpentry teacher, or Jackdaw, as we had nicknamed him. He had moved into Arzamas at the beginning of the war and rented rooms on the outskirts of the town. I was at his place a few times. He liked us too, and taught us how to make cages, boxes

and snares on his woodworking bench. In the summer he'd get a whole bunch together and take us to the woods or out fishing. He was swarthy and lean and he walked with a slight hop, like a bird, for which he was nicknamed Jackdaw.

He was arrested quite unexpectedly — none of us really knew why. Some of the fellows said he was a spy and had passed on secret information about troop movements to the Germans by phone. Some even claimed that he was an ex-highwayman whose past had finally caught up with him.

I didn't believe these stories. First of all, no telephone wire could have been laid from here to the border, and secondly, what sort of secret information about troop movements could you give from Arzamas? There were hardly any troops here at all — just seven men plus an orderly, and the four bakers of the commissary depot at the railroad station, who were soldiers in name only, because they were really nothing but ordinary bakers. And the only troop movement in our town all that time was when the officer Balagushin moved from Piryatin's apartment to Basyutin's, after which there weren't any more movements.

As for the teacher having been a highwayman — that was an obvious lie. Petka Zolotukhin

thought that one up, and everybody knew Petka was an awful liar. If he asked you for a loan of three kopeks he'd swear later that he'd given it back, or he'd give back your fishing rod without the hooks and then tell you he never took them. And what sort of a robber could the teacher have been? His face wasn't the kind robbers have, and he had a funny way, of walking, and he was kind, besides which he was thin and always coughed.

Fedka and I finally reached the gully.

By this time I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

"Fedka," I said, "what was the teacher really arrested for? It's a lie, isn't it, about him being a spy and a robber?"

"Of course, it's a lie," he replied, slowing down and glancing around cautiously as if we were in a crowd and not in the open field. "He was arrested for politics."

I didn't have time to question Fedka as to the politics that had got the teacher into trouble, because just then we heard the heavy tramp of a column of men approaching a bend in the road ahead of us.

There were about a hundred prisoners in all. They were not shackled, and were escorted by only six guards.

The tired, morose faces of the Austrians

blended with their grey uniforms and crumpled caps. They marched in silence, close-ranked, with measured, soldier's tread.

"So that's what they're like!" we thought as the column marched past. "So these are the Austrians and Germans whose atrocities have shocked the world. They scowl as though they don't like being prisoners. Serves you right, you swine!"

When the men had passed, Fedka shook his fist at them.

"Invented gases, did you! Ooh, you stinking German frankfurters!"

We returned home feeling somewhat depressed. I don't know why. Perhaps because the tired, grey prisoners had not made the impression we expected. If not for their uniforms they would have looked very much like refugees — the same lean, pinched faces, the same fatigue, and a sort of tired indifference to everything around them.

#### *Chapter Four*

The summer vacation came around. Fedka and I had made all sorts of plans for it, and there was plenty of work to do. First of all, we had to build a raft, launch it in the pond adjoining our garden, declare ourselves masters

of the sea and give battle to the combined fleet of the Pantyushkins and Simakovs, which guarded the approaches to their gardens on the opposite bank.

We already had a small fleet — a floating little garden gate — but it was much less battleworthy than the fleet of the enemy, who had half of a large old gate which served as a heavy cruiser, and a feeding trough converted into a light destroyer.

The forces were clearly unequal.

We decided, therefore, to strengthen our armaments by building a huge ultramodern superdreadnought.

As building material we proposed to use the logs of the old tumbledown steam bath. To appease my mother I promised to design our dreadnought so that it could always be used as a sort of ramp to stand on when she rinsed out the wash.

The enemy across the way showed signs of alarm when he noticed the rearmament going on in our camp. He also began to busy himself with something, but our intelligence service soon reported that he had nothing serious to counter us with since he lacked building materials. His attempts to steal some boards intended for a shed came to nought: the family council

did not approve of this unlicensed expenditure of materials, and the enemy admirals — Senka Pantyushkin and Grishka Simakov — were mercilessly flogged by their respective fathers.

We fussed about with the logs for several days. It was not so easy to build a dreadnought. It took quite a bit of money and time, and it so happened that Fedka and I were financially embarrassed at the moment. We used up more than fifty kopeks' worth of nails alone, and we still had to acquire rope for the anchor and some bunting for a flag.

To get everything we needed we secretly had to pawn, for the sum of seventy kopeks, two theology textbooks, a Gläser and Petzold German Grammar and a Russian Reader.

But our dreadnought turned out to be a beauty. We launched her late one afternoon, with Timka Shtukin and Yashka Tsukkerstein assisting. The onlookers consisted of all the shoemaker's kids, my little sister and the mongrel Wolfie, alias Chubby, alias Beetle — everyone had his own name for the dog. The raft creaked and grated down the ways and then plopped heavily into the water. A loud "hurrah!" went up, followed by a salute of toy pistols, and the flag was hoisted over the dreadnought.

Our flag was black with a red border and

a yellow circle in the middle. It fluttered proudly in the warm summer breeze. We raised anchor.

The sun was setting. We could hear the distant bells of a flock of goats, of which Arzamas boasted countless numbers, returning from the meadow.

Fedka and I were both aboard the dreadnought. Behind us, at a respectful distance, sailed our little gate, which was now to function as a messenger launch.

Fully conscious of its power, our squadron slowly sailed up to the middle of the pond and defiled past the enemy shores. We challenged the enemy by megaphone and signals, but in vain — he did not want to accept combat and hid shamefully under a rotting branch in the bay. The enemy gave vent to his impotent rage by opening fire on our ships from his shore batteries. But we immediately manoeuvred out of range and calmly made for port with no casualties, if the slight bruise on Yashka Tsukkerstein's back from a potato is not taken into account.

"Oh-ho-ho!" we yelled as we sailed away. "Afraid to come out and fight, huh?"

"You just wait! We'll come out all right. Don't count your chickens before they're hatched. You haven't scared us any!"

"Yah, we can just see you're not scared! Cowards, little German punks!"

We safely entered port, cast anchor, moored our rafts fast with chains and jumped ashore.

That evening Fedka and I nearly had a quarrel. We hadn't decided beforehand who would command the fleet. When I proposed that he take command of the messenger boat, Fedka spat contemptuously. Then I proposed that he could also be port master and chief of the shore batteries, and chief of the air force as soon as we acquired one. But even the air force did not tempt Fedka; he stubbornly insisted on being admiral, threatening otherwise to go over to the side of the enemy.

Not wishing to lose a valuable assistant, I finally gave in and proposed that we take turns at being admiral: one day for him and the next for me.

We left it at that.

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We made two bows and a dozen arrows and set out for the copse. We took along a reserve supply of several "frogs" — paper tubes filled with a compound of potassium chlorate and coal dust, which we folded several times and bound tight with twine. We would attach a "frog" to an arrowhead, and while one of us

drew the bowstring, the other would ignite the twine around the "frog." The arrow would soar high up into the sky where the "frog" would explode in a fiery zigzag, scaring away the blackbirds and crows.

The copse adjoined the cemetery. It was quite dense, and had many pits and little pools of water. Buttercups, celandine and ferns grew in its green, shady clearings.

When we had played to our heart's content we climbed over a stone wall into the remotest and most deserted corner of the cemetery. The stillness, broken only by the chirruping of pipits in the trees, had a soothing effect on us after the excitement of our game.

As we threaded our way among the grave-mounds, some of which barely rose above the level of the ground, we conversed in subdued voices.

"Look," I said to Fedka, "past this bend the soldiers' graves begin. Last week they buried Semyon Kozhevnikov here — from the hospital. You know, Fedka, I remember him pretty well. Long before the war — I was just a kid then — he used to come around to see my father. Once he gave me a rubber band for my sling. It was a swell rubber band. Only my mother threw it into the stove one day — she thought I'd broken Basyugin's window with it."

"But you did, didn't you?"

"What if I did? They had to prove it, didn't they? Nobody saw me do it — they just went on suspicion. What sort of justice is that, I ask you? And suppose I hadn't broken it — I'd be blamed just the same, wouldn't I?"

"'Course," agreed Fedka. "Mothers are always like that. They won't touch anything belonging to a girl, but as soon as they see a boy's toy they throw it out. My mother broke two of my nail-tipped arrows and let my rat out of its cage. And once it was even worse.... I unscrewed one of those empty knobs — you know, the kind they put on the tops of bedposts for decoration. Ma went off to church. Well, I got together some saltpetre and coal. I thought I'd fill the knob with gunpowder and then go out to the copse and explode it. I was so busy with the thing I didn't notice Ma come in. 'What did you take the knob off the bed for?' she says. 'You nasty boy! And I was wondering where all the knobs had gone to!' And she smacked me on the head so hard I saw stars! Good thing Pa stood up for me. He says, 'What did you take that knob for?' 'Can't you see?' I says. 'I'm making a bomb.' He frowns and says: 'Drop it. Better not play around with such things. Just look at this terrorist, will you!' And he laughs and pats me on the head."

"Fedka," I said casually, "I know what a terrorist is. They're the guys who throw bombs at policemen and are against the rich. What are we, Fedka? Rich or poor?"

"In between," Fedka replied, after considering the point. "Can't exactly say we're very poor. Ever since Pa got a job we've had dinner every day and Ma bakes us patties on Sundays, and sometimes even makes compote. Gee, do I love compote! Do you?"

"Sure I do. Only I like apple jelly better. I suppose we're in between too. You look at the Bebeshins — they own a whole factory. I once went over to that Vaska of theirs. You should've seen how many maids and butlers they've got up there. Vaska's father gave him a real pony too."

"'Course they've got everything," Fedka agreed. "They've got a lot of money. Sinyugin built a tower on top of his house and set up a telescope there. A h-u-u-ge one! When he gets fed up with things down here on earth he goes to his tower and they bring him a snack and a bottle of something.... And he sits there all night looking at the stars and planets. A couple of days ago he had a party up there in the tower, and they say that when they started looking through the telescope they busted a glass and now they can't see anything any more."

"Fedka! What do you think? Why does that Sinyugin get to look at the stars and planets and have a good time, and other people get nothing? You take Sigov who works at his factory. Talk about planets — he doesn't get enough to eat even! Yesterday he came down to the shoemaker to borrow fifty kopeks."

"Why? How should I know? You go ask the teacher or Father Gennadi."

Fedka was silent. After a while he broke off a branch of fragrant wild jasmine and said very quietly:

"Pa say's it'll soon be the other way round."

"What'll be the other way round?"

"Everything. You see, Borka, I'm not exactly sure myself. I made believe I was asleep, but I wasn't really. Pa was talking to the factory watchman about strikes breaking out again like in 1905. Know what happened in 1905?"

"Not for certain," I said, reddening.

"There was a revolution. Only it didn't turn out right. A revolution means burning down all the landowners' houses, and giving all the land to the peasants, and taking everything from the rich and giving it to the poor. I got all that from what they said."

Fedka fell silent. Again I was irritated — why did Fedka always know more than I did? I'd find out too if I only had somebody to find out from.

They don't write about things like that in books, and nobody ever talked to me about them.

At home, after dinner, I sat down beside Mother when she stretched out on her bed for a rest, and said:

"Ma, tell me something about 1905. Why do other people talk about it? Fedka knows everything that's interesting but I never get to know anything at all."

Mother turned over quickly, knitted her brows, and was about to scold me when she thought better of it and gave me such a curious stare you'd think she were seeing me for the first time.

"What 1905 are you talking about?"

"Oh, Ma, you ought to know! Look how big you are! You were pretty old then but I was only a year old and I can't remember a thing."

"Yes, but what do you want me to tell you about? You ought to ask your father. He's good at telling stories about those days. I didn't have a chance to see what was going on because of you, you little rascal. Talk about babies — you were some baby, believe me — as loud as they come! I never had a minute's peace with you. You used to yell all night long, and I couldn't even think about myself, let alone the rest of the world."

"But why did I yell like that?" I asked, feeling a bit hurt. "Was I afraid? They say there was shooting going on and Cossacks galloping about. Maybe I was scared?"

"Scared, you silly? You yelled just because you felt like yelling. What sort of scare could you have had? One night the gendarmes came in to make a search — what for, God only knows. They were searching a lot of places at the time. Well, they turned the whole apartment upside down but they didn't find a thing. The officer was very polite. He tickled you and you gurgled. 'Nice little boy you have here,' he said. He picked you up as if he wanted to play with you, and then he winked at the gendarme to poke around in your crib. Then suddenly you began to drip! Goodness me, right onto the officer's uniform! Heavens, what a fuss there was! I snatched you up and gave the officer a piece of cloth to wipe himself with. Just think of it! A brand new uniform — and soaked through; you wetted his pants and his sword. Gave him a regular shower, you little rascal!" Mother rocked with laughter.

"Ma, that's not what I want to know!" I blurted, feeling quite put out by then. "I asked you about the revolution and you tell me baby stories."

"Oh, stop pestering me," she said.

But when she saw my disappointment she

thought for a few moments and then reached for a bunch of keys.

"Why do I have to *tell* you about it?" she said. "Here, open the storeroom, and under a pile of old junk in the big box you'll find a lot of books of your father's. Take a look. If he hasn't torn them all up you may find something about your 1905."

I snatched up the keys and ran to the door.

"But," Mother called out after me, "just you dare to mistake the jar of jam for the books or poke your finger into the pitcher of cream like you did the last time and I'll give you such a revolution you won't recognize your own shadow!"

The next few days I did nothing but read. I remember that I could get through only three pages of the first of the two books I selected. I'd picked it up at random and it was called *The Philosophy of Poverty*. Naturally, I didn't understand a word of all that brainy stuff. But the second book was stories by Stepnyak-Kravchinsky and was easy to understand; I read it through to the end and then began all over again.

Everything was the other way around in those stories. The heroes were the ones the police were after, and instead of liking the detectives you simply hated them. The stories were about revolutionaries. The revolutionaries had secret organ-

izations and printshops. They planned revolts against the landowners and merchants and generals. The police fought them and hunted them down. And then the revolutionaries were sent to prison or to their death, and the survivors carried on their work.

I was fascinated by the book, since up till then I had known nothing about revolutionaries. And it made me mad to think what a rotten town our Arzamas was, where you never heard a thing about revolutionaries. We had burglars: the Tupikovs' entire wash was stolen from their attic where it was drying; we had Gypsy horse thieves, and even a real highwayman — Vanka Seledkin — who had murdered a tax inspector — but we didn't have a single revolutionary.

### Chapter Five

Fedka, Timka, Yashka Tsukkerstein and I had just begun to play *gorodki*\* when the shoemaker's boy dashed over from the garden to tell us that the rafts of the Pantyushkins and Simakovs had sneaked up to our shore and that the two blankety-blank admirals were trying to

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\* A Russian game similar to tenpins. — *Trans.*

break the locks off our rafts and tow them away to their side.

We flew into the garden yelling and whooping. When the enemy caught sight of us they leapt onto their rafts and sailed off. We decided to pursue the foe and sink him.

It happened to be Fedka's day to command the dreadnought. While he and Yashka were pushing off that unwieldy ship, Timka and I cut across the enemy's path in our little old messenger boat. It was then that our enemies made their mistake. They had not expected us to chase them, and instead of heading straight for home they altered their course and swung off to the left. When they noticed their mistake they were already far out; they began to work their hardest to get across before we had time to stop them. Fedka and Yashka were still struggling with the big raft, so Timka and I were faced with the heroic task of detaining the superior enemy forces with our light vessel.

We soon came face to face with the enemy squadron and bravely opened fire. It goes without saying that we immediately came under heavy cross fire.

I was hit in the back twice with clods of earth, and Timka's cap was knocked into the water. Our shells were giving out and we were already

drenched to the skin when Fedka and Yashka finally pushed off from shore.

Taking stock of our position, the enemy decided to make a bee line for the home shore.

We knew that a collision with their rafts would sink our gate.

"Hurricane fire with out last shells!" I commanded.

Our last desperate volleys held the enemy for no longer than half a minute. But our dreadnought was coming full speed ahead to our aid.

"Hold on!" Fedka cried, opening fire from a distance.

The enemy craft were almost on top of us. We had two alternatives: either to let them slip into their fortified port, or bar their way at the risk of a mortal battle. I chose the latter alternative. With a powerful stroke of my pole I placed our raft in the path of the enemy.

Their flagman crashed into us, and the next moment Timka and I found ourselves neck-deep in the tepid green water. However, the collision had stopped the enemy as well. That was all we had been waiting for. Our mighty dreadnought — huge and clumsy but strongly-built — rammed the side of the enemy craft and turned it over. There remained the feeding trough destroyer. It tried to put its speed to advantage and slip past us, but we capsized it with our pole.

Timka and I climbed up on Fedka's raft, and now there remained nothing of the enemy crew but heads sticking out of the water. We were magnanimous, however. Taking the upturned rafts in tow, we permitted the defeated men to clamber up on them and brought our trophies and captives triumphantly into port to the loud cheers of the boys strung along the garden fences.

Letters from Father were rare. He wrote very little and always the same thing: "Still alive and well, sitting here in the trenches and wondering whether we'll ever do anything else but sit."

I was disappointed in his letters. What sort of business was this, after all? Couldn't a man find anything interesting to write about from the front? He could describe a battle, an attack or some heroic deed, couldn't he? But this way you read the letters and got the impression that life at the front was duller even than in Arzamas during the autumn rains.

Why could others, like Ensign Tupikov, Mitka's brother, for instance, send home letters with descriptions of battles and exploits, and a weekly package of snapshots?

In one snapshot he was standing next to a cannon, in a second by a machine gun, in a third he was on horseback waving his sword, and in

still another his head was sticking out of the cockpit of an aeroplane! But Father didn't even once have his picture taken in a trench, let alone an aeroplane, and his letters were as dull as ditchwater.

Late one afternoon someone knocked at our door. A soldier with a wooden leg hobbled in on crutches and asked for Mother. Mother wasn't home but she was due at any moment. The soldier told me he was a friend of my father's, and that they had served in the same regiment. Now he was going home for good — he lived in a village in our district — and had stopped in to bring us greetings and a letter from my father.

He sat down, propped his crutches up against the stove, rummaged inside his shirt, and pulled out a greasy envelope.

I was very much surprised by the unusual thickness of the letter. Father never wrote such big ones. I decided he must have put some pictures in it.

"So you served in the same regiment?" I said, taking in his lean and, as it seemed to me, sullen face, his grey, crumpled greatcoat with the Cross of St. George pinned to it, and the crude wooden leg attached to his right knee.

"Same regiment, same company, same platoon and same trench — matter of fact, shoulder to shoulder. You his boy?"

"Yes."

"Aha! Your name'll be Boris, then? That's right. Your father told me about you. I've got something here for you. Only he said to hide it away and not touch it until he comes back."

The soldier reached into his home-made leather bag fashioned out of the top part of a boot. At his every movement nauseating waves of iodoform spread throughout the room.

He drew out something wrapped in a rag and tightly bound with string, and handed it to me. It was a small, heavy bundle. I wanted to open it but the soldier said:

"Wait awhile. Don't rush. There's plenty of time to see what's in it."

"Well, so how are things at the front? What are the battles like? How's the morale of our troops?" I inquired gravely.

The soldier looked at me and screwed up his eyes. I squirmed under his heavy, slightly mocking gaze. I felt that my questions had been stilted and artificial.

"Well, well, listen to him!" he smiled.

"Morale? What sort of morale can you expect to find in a trench, kiddo? Rotten morale. Worse than a stinking corpse's."

He got out his tobacco pouch, rolled a cigarette in silence, blew out a stream of acrid

makhorka smoke and, gazing past me at the window glowing with the sunset, added:

"I'm sick of it all, fed up to the gills. And there seems to be no end to it."

Mother came in. When she saw the soldier she stopped short in the doorway and clutched the doorknob.

"What's . . . happened?" she asked quietly with lips that had gone white. "Alexei?"

"Pa's sent a letter!" I shouted. "A fat one, with pictures maybe, and he sent me a present too!"

"Is he all right?" Mother asked, throwing off her shawl. "When I saw your greatcoat from the doorway my heart sank. I thought for sure something had happened to him."

"Nothing's happened so far," the soldier replied. "He sends his best regards and asked me to give you this letter. He didn't want to send it by mail. The mail's none too reliable these days...."

Mother tore the envelope open. There were no pictures inside, only a batch of greasy sheets covered with writing.

A bit of clay and a dried blade of grass had stuck to one of the sheets.

I undid the bundle and found a small Mauser and a spare clip inside.

"What strange notions your father has!" Mother grumbled. "Do you call that a toy?"

"That's all right," replied the soldier. "Your son's okay, isn't he? Strapping big boy, almost my size. Let him hide it away for the time being. It's a good revolver. Alexei found it in a German trench. It's okay — can always come in handy."

I touched the cold chiselled butt. Then I wrapped up the Mauser carefully and put it away in a drawer.

Mother treated the soldier to tea. He drank seven glasses while he told us about Father and the war. I drank only half a glass and Mother didn't touch hers at all. She poked about among her bottles, found a little phial of spirits and poured some out for the soldier. The soldier squinted, added water to the spirits, sipped it slowly, heaved a sigh and shook his head.

"It's a rotten life," he said, pushing away his glass. "They wrote from home that the farm's going to rack and ruin. What could I do about it? We starved out there for months ourselves. Times we felt so bad we wished we were dead. The men are at the end of their tether. Sometimes your blood would boil! 'Eh,' you'd think, 'give me the strength, and I'd spit on them all and go home. Let them fight who want to, but I don't owe the Germans anything, and they don't owe me either.' Alexei and me, we used to talk a lot about it. The nights were long enough...."

Couldn't sleep for the fleas. Only fun we had was singing and talking. Times you felt like crying, or choking somebody, but you'd sit down instead and start singing. Didn't have any tears to cry with. And our arms weren't long enough to reach the guys who started it. 'Eh,' you'd say, 'come on, you boys, pals of mine, let's strike up a song!' "

The soldier's face was flushed and moist; the odour of iodoform grew stronger and stronger. I opened the window. The fresh, pungent aroma of hay and over-ripe cherries flooded the room.

I sat on the windowsill drawing designs on the pane with my finger and listening to the soldier. His words left a dry, bitter sediment in my heart, and this sediment gradually formed a thick layer over all the clear and distinct impressions I had had of the war, of its heroes and its sacred mission. I looked at the soldier almost with hatred. He took off his belt, unbuttoned his sweat-stained collar and, apparently a bit drunk by this time, continued:

"Death, of course, is a lousy proposition. But the bad part of war's not death so much as the hurt it's done us. We're not sore at death. It's a law, and we know every man's got to die sooner or later. But who thought up the law about fighting? I didn't, you didn't and he didn't — but somebody did. What I want to say is, if the

Lord God really is all-powerful, all-divine and all-merciful, like the books say, then why doesn't he call that guy up to him and say: 'Listen, why did you have to drag millions of people into war? What good does it do them, and what good does it do you? Speak up, so that everybody can understand.' Only," the soldier swayed and almost knocked over his glass, "only the Lord doesn't seem to like to interfere with things here on earth. So we'll just have to stick it out some more. We're a patient people. But when our patience gives out there'll be the devil to pay! And then we'll appoint judges and try the culprits."

The soldier fell silent. He frowned at Mother, who was staring at the tablecloth. She had not uttered a single syllable during his tirade. He got up, reached for the plate of herring, and said in a conciliatory and reproachful tone:

"Eh.... What am I harping about, anyway! It's all stuff and nonsense! Everything has its time, and its end too. Got a few drops left in that bottle of yours, lady?"

Without lifting her eyes, Mother added a few drops of the warm, aromatic spirits to his glass.

All night long Mother cried in her room; the pages of Father's letter rustled as she turned them over. Then the dull green flame of the icon lamp glimmered through a tiny crack and I knew

that Mother was praying. She didn't show me Father's letter. At that time I didn't have any inkling of what he had written and why she cried.

The soldier left in the morning. Before he went off he slapped me on the back and said, as though in answer to my question:

"It's okay, kiddo. You're still a youngster. I bet you'll see things we can't even dream of!"

He said goodbye and hobbled out on his crutches, taking away with him the smell of iodoform and the oppressive mood that his presence, his rasping laugh and his bitter words had evoked in us.

### *Chapter Six*

The summer drew to a close. Fedka started to cram for his re-exams, and Yashka Tsukkerstein caught a fever. I suddenly found myself quite alone.

I lay around at home reading Father's books and the papers.

There was no talk about the war ending. Refugees poured into town; the Germans had made big advances and had occupied more than half of Poland. The richer evacuees, of whom there were not many, found quarters in private homes. Our merchants, monks and priests were

very religious and were unwilling to take in the refugees, the bulk of whom were poor Jews with large families. Most of the refugees lived in barracks out of town, near the copse.

By this time all the young men and all the able-bodied muzhiks in the villages had been sent to the front. Many farms were ruined. There was nobody to work the fields, and beggars — old men, women and children — began to stream into town.

Before, you could have walked the streets a whole day without coming across a single unfamiliar face. You might not have known a man's name but you were certain you'd seen him somewhere. Now you bumped into strange people at every step — Jews, Rumanians, Poles, Austrian prisoners and wounded soldiers from the Red Cross Hospital.

There was a shortage of food. Butter, eggs and milk were bought up at high prices at the market early in the morning. Lines formed outside the bakeries; white bread disappeared, and there wasn't enough rye bread to go around. In addition to the food prices, the merchants mercilessly boosted prices on everything else.

It was said that Bebeshin had made as much during the past year as in the previous five. And Sinyugin grew so rich he gave six thousand rubles to the church, abandoned his tower with the

telescope and ordered from Moscow a real live crocodile which he put in a pool specially built for the purpose.

Such a large crowd followed the crocodile when it was carted from the railroad station that Grishka Bocharov, the cross-eyed sexton of the Church of Our Saviour, took it for a church procession with the Oranskaya Icon of the Madonna, and began to toll his bells. The bishop imposed thirteen days of penance on Grishka for his error. Many members of the congregation asserted that Grishka was lying when he said he'd tolled the bells by mistake; they thought he had done it on purpose, out of mischief. Doing penance wasn't enough, they said. He ought to be flung into prison as an example. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd taken a funeral for a church procession, but to mistake that foul animal for a famous icon was nothing short of a mortal sin!

I shut my book with a bang and ran out into the street. I had nothing to do, so I went over to the cemetery, where Timka Shtukin lived. Timka wasn't at home. His father, a grey-haired, robust old man who was a good friend of my father's, patted me on the shoulder and said:

"Growing up, kid? When your father comes home he won't recognize you. Taking right after your father in height — look how big you are! And my Timka seems to be taking after his

mother's father; he's turned out no bigger than Tom Thumb. I can't see where all the good food goes to! How's your father? When you write, send him my regards. He's a good, straightforward man. We worked eight years together in the same village school. He was a teacher and I was the watchman. Only that's a long time ago. You were in diapers then and wouldn't remember. Well, run along. Timka's somewhere around, catching goldfinches. You'll find him in the birch grove, behind the soldiers' graves. He doesn't dare catch them any nearer — the warden might see him and make a fuss."

I found Timka in the birch grove. He was standing under a tree holding a stick with a loop attached to the end, trying to lasso a goldfinch that was barely visible against the yellow leaves. Timka gave me a frightened look, imploring me with his eyes and a shake of his head not to come any closer or I'd scare away the bird. I stopped in my tracks.

I've never seen a bird that's a bigger fool than the goldfinch. Boys catch them with a long rod ending in a horsehair loop which is slipped over their neck.

Timka carefully brought the end of his rod close to the bird. The goldfinch cocked its head at the loop and hopped lazily to a neighbouring branch. Sticking out his tongue and holding his

breath, Timka once more began manipulating his rod. The foolish goldfinch watched Timka's manoeuvres with interest. Like the little idiot it was, it let the loop slip over its ruffled head. Timka jerked his rod and the half-choked goldfinch fell to the ground without a peep, beating its wings desperately. In another minute it was hopping about in a cage with five others of its kind.

"See that!" Timka yelled, dancing a little jig. "Slick — huh? Six birds! Only they're all goldfinches. You can't catch a tomtit like that. Got to use a trap or a bow — he's a sly little rascal. But these here fools climb right into the noose themselves!"

Suddenly Timka broke off and his face stiffened as if he had been clubbed on the head. Shaking a warning finger at me, he stood frozen to the spot for a few moments. Then he gave a hop and said:

"Hear that?"

"What, Timka? I heard the train whistle down at the station."

"For the love of Pete! He didn't hear!" Timka waved his arms in despair. "A robin! Didn't you hear her chirp? A real redbreast! I can tell it's her by the way she twitters, the little honey. Been chasing her for more than a week now. You know where the drowned man was buried? Well,

she's hiding there in the maples. The maples grow thick around there, and their leaves are bright as fire right now. Come on, let's have a look at her!"

Timka knew every mound and every gravestone in the cemetery. Hopping along like a bird, he pointed them out to me:

"This is where the fireman's buried — he was burned to death last year; and this is blindman Churbakin's grave. Only guys like that are buried in this section. The merchants have good ground set aside for themselves. Over there's the tombstone of Sinyugin's grandmother — got archangels on it. And this," Timka pointed to a barely noticeable mound, "this is where they buried the fellow who hanged himself. Pa says he did it on purpose. He was a mechanic at the depot. I just can't see how a guy could do a thing like that on purpose."

"Life must be tough, Timka. Otherwise he wouldn't do it, would he?"

"What!" Timka sang out in a protesting tone. "Tough, you say? You really think it's tough?"

"What do you think?"

"Life! Gee, I think it's wonderful! How could death be better? Here you can run around and do whatever you like, but if you're dead — you're dead, and that's all there is to it."

Timka gave a loud, shrill laugh. Then he sud-

denly stopped again, as though stunned. He stood motionless for a few moments, then whispered.

"Quiet, now! She's somewhere close by, hiding, the sly rascal! But it won't help her — I'll catch her anyway!"

\*

It was evening when I returned home. He was a funny boy, that Timka. Only a year and a half younger than I, but he was so small he hardly looked ten years old, let alone twelve. He was always fussing around, and the boys used to laugh at him and flick him on the back of the neck, but he never took offense for long. Whenever Timka asked for anything, say a penknife to sharpen his pencil, or a pen, or for help with a difficult arithmetic problem, he always looked you straight in the face with his large round eyes and for some reason smiled guiltily. He was a coward, but his cowardice was not the ordinary kind. Timka was never more intimidated than when the inspector or the principal approached him. Once, during class, the doorman came in and said that Timka was wanted in the teachers' room. Timka couldn't drag himself out of his seat; he looked around the class, as if to say: "What have I done? Honest, it's not my fault." His pockmarked face blanched and he tottered

out. During recess we learned that he had been called out not to be handcuffed and shipped off to do a term of penal servitude, and not even to receive a poor mark for deportment, but simply to sign for an arithmetic textbook he had received free of charge the year before.

\*

Two days later school began. The classrooms reverberated with noise and excitement. Each boy told how he had spent the summer, how many fish, crabs, lizards or hedgehogs he had caught. One bragged about a hawk he had killed, another about the quantity of mushrooms and wild strawberries he had picked, a third swore he had caught a live snake. There were some who had been to vacation resorts in the Crimea or the Caucasus — but not many. They held themselves aloof and did not babble about hedgehogs or strawberries; instead they spoke primly of palms, sea bathing and horses.

That year we were told for the first time that since prices had gone up we could wear uniforms made out of cheaper fabrics.

Mother made me a tunic and trousers out of something called "devil's hide."

This "hide" really must have been peeled off a devil, because once when I fled out of the monastery garden with a huge monk brandishing

a club behind me, and caught my trousers on a nail in the fence, the trousers did not tear but I hung from the fence, thanks to which the monk managed to give me a couple of hefty whacks.

There was still another innovation. An army officer was assigned to our school, we were given wooden rifles which looked very much like the real thing, and military drill began.

We received no more letters from Father after the one brought by the soldier with the wooden leg.

Each time Fedka's father walked past our house with his mail bag, my little sister, who would be watching for him, would stick her head out of the window and ask in her high voice:

"Uncle Sergei! Is there anything from Papa?"

"No, kiddie, nothing today!" he would invariably reply. "Most likely tomorrow."

The next day, however, would again bring nothing.

### *Chapter Seven*

One day in September Fedka happened to stay at my house till late in the evening. We were doing our homework together.

We had just finished and Fedka was gathering up his books to go home when it began to

rain in torrents. I ran into the next room to close the window looking out onto the garden.

Gusts of wind were sweeping the dry leaves up into the air with a swish; a few large drops of rain fell on my face.

I had just managed to shut one half of the window and was reaching out for the other half when a sizable lump of clay plopped down on the windowsill.

"What a wind!" I thought. "Looks like the trees'll be crashing down next."

"There's a regular squall outside," I said to Fedka when I returned to the other room. "Don't go now, you fool. It's raining cats and dogs. Look what the wind blew onto the sill."

Fedka didn't believe me.

"Go on! You think a lump like that could be blown in?"

"Well, for heaven's sake!" I got sore. "I'm telling you that when I started closing the window this thing plopped down on the sill."

I looked at the lump of clay. Maybe somebody had thrown it in after all? But it seemed incredible.

"Fiddlesticks! There's no one outside. Who'd bother to come into our garden in such weather? It's the wind all right."

Mother was busy sewing in the other room. Sis was sleeping. Fedka stayed another half

hour. By that time the sky had cleared and the moon was shining in through the wet window. The wind had died down.

"Well, I'll be going."

"S'long. Don't mind if I don't see you to the door? Slam it hard and the lock'll close of itself."

Fedka put on his cap, shoved his books inside his jacket to keep them from getting wet, and went out. I heard the door bang as it shut behind him.

Just as I began taking off my shoes I noticed Fedka's notebook on the floor. It must have slipped out from under his jacket when he was leaving. It was the notebook we'd been doing our mathematics problems in.

"There's a nitwit for you," I thought. "Tomorrow we'll have algebra first thing in the morning. Won't he be upset though! Hope I remember to take it along."

I undressed and jumped into bed, but before I had a chance to make myself comfortable the doorbell tinkled faintly.

"Now who's that?" Mother asked in surprise. "Could it be a telegram from your father? No, that wouldn't be the mailman — he always rattles the knob. Run down and open the door."

"I'm in bed already, Ma. That isn't the mailman, Ma. It's probably Fedka come for his

notebook — he must have noticed he didn't have it on the way home."

"Heavens, what a scatterbrain!" cried Mother. "Couldn't he come for it in the morning? Where's the notebook?"

She took it, slipped her bare feet into her shoes and went out.

I could hear her shoes tapping down the steps. The lock clicked and the next moment there was a choked shriek. I jumped out of bed. I imagined right away that Mother had been assaulted by burglars. I snatched up the candlestick from the table and was just about to smash the window with it and yell out into the street when I heard something that sounded like laughter or kissing, followed by excited, muffled whispers. Then two pairs of feet climbed the stairs.

The door flew open and I froze to the bed, still holding the candlestick.

In the doorway stood Mother smiling, her eyes brimming with joy, and next to her — long, unshaven, bespattered with mud and soaked to the skin, the dearest soldier I knew — my father.

I sprang up, and the next instant his strong, calloused hands gripped me tight.

In the other room my little sister stirred,

disturbed by the noise. I wanted to run in and wake her up, but Father held me back.

"Don't, Boris," he said. "Don't wake her up — and don't make too much noise."

He turned to Mother:

"Varyusha, if the child wakes up don't tell her I've arrived. Let her sleep. Where could we send her for these three days?"

"We can send her to Ivanovskoye Village," Mother said. "She's been wanting a long time now to visit her grandmother. The sky seems to have cleared. Boris can take her there the first thing in the morning. You don't have to speak in a whisper, Alyosha, she sleeps soundly. Sometimes they come from the hospital for me at night, so she's used to it."

I couldn't believe my ears.

What? They wanted to send pop-eyed little Tanyusha to Grandma's first thing in the morning, and not let her see Pa during his leave from the front? What was the matter? What was the idea?

"Borya," Mother said. "You go to sleep in my room and at six in the morning take Tanyusha over to Grandma's. And mind you don't tell anyone there that Father's here."

I looked at Father. He hugged me tight and was about to say something but changed his mind and only hugged me tighter instead.

I lay down on Mother's bed. Father and Mother remained in the dining room and closed the door. I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. I tossed from side to side, tried counting to fifty and then to a hundred — but sleep wouldn't come.

My head was in a whirl. The moment I began thinking of what had taken place, all sorts of crazy, conflicting ideas, one crazier than the other, raced through my mind. My temples felt as though they were being pressed together, the feeling one gets after a long ride on a merry-go-round.

I didn't fall asleep until late at night. Then the creak of the door woke me up. Father came into the room with a candle.

I opened my eyes a fraction. Father was in his stockinged feet. He tiptoed up to Tanyusha's bed and lowered the candle.

He stood there for a few minutes, gazing at her blond curls and pink cheeks. Then he bent over her. He was obviously going through an inner struggle: he wanted to caress his daughter, but he was afraid to wake her up. He decided not to, straightened up quickly, turned around and tiptoed out.

The door creaked again — and the light was gone.

... The clock struck seven. I opened my eyes.

The sun shone bright through the yellow leaves of the birch tree outside the window. I dressed quickly and glanced into the next room. They were asleep. Closing the door, I began to rouse my sister.

"Where's Mummie?" she asked, rubbing her eyes and staring at the empty bed.

"Ma's been called to the hospital. She told me to take you to Grandma's."

Sis began to laugh and wagged a finger at me with a sly smile.

"Ooh, you're fibbing, Borka! Just yesterday Grandma asked Mummie to let me visit her and Mummie wouldn't let me go."

"That was yesterday but today she's changed her mind. Hurry and dress. Look how nice it is outside today. Grandma'll take you to the woods for ashberries."

Sis saw I wasn't joking, so she jumped up. While I helped her dress she chattered away:

"So Mummie's changed her mind? Oh, how nice it is when Mummie changes her mind! Borka, let's take Liz the cat with us. Oh, all right, if not the cat then let's take Beetle. He's so funny! You should have seen him lick my face yesterday! Only Mummie scolded me afterwards. She doesn't like it when your face is licked. Beetle once licked Mummie when she

was resting in the garden and she hit him with a stick."

Sis jumped off the bed and ran to the door.

"Borka, open the door for me. My kerchief's in the corner there, and my doll carriage is there too."

I dragged her away and lifted her back onto the bed.

"You mustn't go in there, Tanyushka, a strange man's sleeping in there. He came last night. I'll bring you your kerchief."

"What strange man?" she asked. "The same's last time?"

"That's right."

"With a wooden leg?"

"No, with an iron leg."

"Oh, Borka! I've never seen a man with an iron leg. Let me take the ti-i-niest peep. I'll walk on tiptoe."

"Don't you dare! Sit still now."

I made my way cautiously into the room, got the kerchief and returned.

"But where's my doll carriage?"

"Oh, what do you want to drag your doll carriage along for? Uncle Yegor will give you a ride on a real cart."

The path to Ivanovskoye followed the bank of the Tesha. I strolled along, and Sis ran ahead,

stopping every now and again to pick up a stick, to watch the geese wallowing in the river, or to play with something she found. The morning freshness, the yellow-green of the autumn fields and the monotonous tinkling of cowbells all had a soothing effect on me.

By now the annoying thought that had plagued me at night had taken firm root in my mind, and I no longer attempted to brush it aside.

I recalled the lump of clay that had fallen on the windowsill. The wind had not done that, of course. How could the wind lift up such a lump? Father had thrown it at me to attract my attention. He had been hiding there in the garden in the wind and rain, waiting for Fedka to leave. He hadn't wanted Sis to see him because she was little and might tell people about his arrival. And soldiers who come home on leave don't hide from people . . . .

I no longer had any doubts: my father was a deserter.

On the way back I bumped into our school inspector.

"Gorikov," he said sternly. "What's the idea? Why aren't you in school?"

"I'm not well," I replied automatically, not realizing how absurd my excuse was.

"Not well? But that's nonsense! Sick people

don't go roaming about the streets. They stay home in bed."

"I'm sick," I said stubbornly. "I've got a temperature."

"Everybody has a temperature," he rejoined angrily. "Don't talk nonsense and come along with me to school!"

"A pretty kettle of fish!" I thought as I trotted by his side. "Why did I have to go and say I was sick? Couldn't I have thought up something more plausible and still not give away the reason for my absence?"

The old school doctor placed his hand on my forehead, and without even bothering to take my temperature gave his diagnosis:

"An acute attack of laziness. I advise you to give him a bad mark in deportment and keep him two hours after school."

The inspector nodded approval of the prescription with the mien of a learned pharmacist.

He called over Semyon the watchman and ordered him to escort me to my class.

One mishap after another befell me that day.

No sooner had I entered the classroom than our German teacher, Elsa Franziscovna, finished questioning Toropigin and, displeased with me for coming in in the middle of a lesson, said:

"Gorikov, *kommen sie her!* Conjugate the verb 'to have.'"

"*Ich habe,*" she began.

"*Du hast,*" Chizhikov whispered to me.

"*Er hat,*" I remembered myself.

"*Wir...*" Here I faltered. I just couldn't keep my mind on German verbs that day.

"*Hastus,*" somebody from the back rows prompted.

"*Hastus,*" I repeated mechanically.

"What are you saying, where is your head? You must think and not listen to what foolish boys say! Give me your notebook!"

"I've forgotten my notebook, Elsa Franziscovna. I did my homework, only I forgot all my books and notebooks at home. I'll bring it to you during recess."

"How can a person forget all his books and notebooks?" the German teacher cried angrily. "You haven't forgotten anything, you're just trying to fool me. You stay in one hour after school for that!"

"Elsa Franziscovna," I said vehemently. "The inspector has already given me two hours. Isn't that enough? What do you expect me to do — sit here all night?"

In reply she let loose a long sentence in German, from which I barely made out that laziness and lying must be punished, and made

out only too well that there was no dodging the third hour of punishment.

During recess Fedka came up to me.

"Why did you come without your books, and why did Semyon bring you?"

I made up some sort of story. I sat through the next and last lesson, which happened to be geography, in a daze. The teacher's questions and the boys' answers made no sense to me at all, and I came to only when the bell rang.

The monitor said the prayer. Then the boys slammed down the lids of their desks and dashed through the door one after another. The room was soon deserted — except for myself.

"My God!" I thought with anguish. "To think I've another three hours to spend here — three whole hours, when Pa's at home and everything is so strange...."

I went downstairs. A long, narrow bench scarred by countless penknives stood outside the teachers' room. Three boys were sitting on it. One, a first-year pupil, was there for slinging a spitball at a classmate, another for fighting, and the third for trying to spit from the third-storey landing on the head of a boy passing by below.

I sat down on the bench and began to ponder. Semyon the watchman walked past rattling his keys.

The superintendent on duty came out to see

how we were getting along. Then he yawned and disappeared again.

I rose quietly and glanced through the door of the teachers' room at the clock inside. What! I'd been sitting there for only half an hour, and I could have sworn it was no less than an hour.

Suddenly I was struck by a criminal thought.

"What the devil, anyway? I'm not a thief under arrest. Father's home after two years and I can see him only under strange and mysterious circumstances, and here I am, cooped up like a prisoner on this bench simply because the inspector and that German teacher got the idea of keeping me here."

I got up to go but was immediately overcome by misgivings. To leave without permission was one of the greatest crimes I could commit in school.

"No, I'd better wait," I decided. I sat down again.

But the next moment I was seized by a mad fury. "It's all the same, anyway," I thought. "Pa ran away from the front" — I gave a wry smile — "but me — I'm afraid to run away from here."

I dashed to the cloakroom, threw on my coat, and slammed the door behind me as I sprang out into the street.

That evening Father tried to open my eyes to a good many things.

"Pa," I said, "you were brave before you ran away from the front, weren't you? You didn't run away because you were afraid, did you?"

"I'm not a coward now, either." He said this calmly, but I gave a start as I involuntarily turned my head toward the window.

A policeman was crossing the street straight toward our house. He was waddling along unhurriedly. When he reached the middle of the street he turned to the right and went off in the direction of the market place.

"He's not — coming — this way," I gasped, breathing hard.

The following evening Father said:

"Borka, visitors may barge in on you any day now. Hide away that toy I sent you. And bear up! You're a big boy now. If you have any trouble in school on my account, pay no attention to it and don't be afraid of anything. Just keep your eyes open and you'll begin to understand what I'm trying to tell you."

"Pa, will we see you sometimes?"

"Of course. I'll come down here every now and again, but I won't stop at home."

"Where will you stop then?"

"You'll find out. You'll be told when the time comes."

It was quite late already, but on the bench outside our gate the shoemaker was still playing

his accordion for a noisy cluster of young men and girls.

"It's time for me to be going," said Father. He was visibly disturbed. "I may be late."

"They'll be sitting there until the wee hours, Pa, because today's Saturday."

Father frowned.

"That's too bad. Can't I climb over the fence and cut across our neighbour's garden? Think a bit. You ought to know all the ins and outs around here."

"No," I replied. "You can't cut across the neighbour's garden. The Aglakovs' fence, over on the left side, is too high, and it's spiked besides, and over on the right there's a vicious dog. But we can go down to the pond, if you like — I've got a raft there — and I can take you straight to the gully the back way. It's dark now and nobody'll be able to make us out, and there isn't a soul in the gully."

Under Father's heavy weight the raft rode lower in the water, and our feet got wet. Father stood very still. The raft skimmed noiselessly over the dark surface of the stagnant pond. Every now and then my pole got stuck in the muddy bottom, and I had all I could do to pull it out.

Twice I tried to land, but both times the bottom of the gully proved too low and slippery.

Then I headed off to the right and pulled the raft up onto the edge of the farthestmost garden.

The garden was quite deserted and the fence was broken.

Father went up to a gap in the fence, through which he could climb down into the gully. Here we said goodbye.

I remained there a few minutes. The crunch of Father's footsteps over the dry twigs grew fainter and fainter....

### *Chapter Eight*

Three days later Mother was called out to the police station and told that her husband had deserted from his unit. They made her sign a statement that she "had no information of her husband's whereabouts, and that she would let the authorities know at once should she come into possession of such."

The next day the son of the chief of police told everyone in school that my father was a deserter.

At our next bible class Father Gennadi delivered a brief but edifying sermon on loyalty to tsar and country, and on the inviolability of the oath. He also told us about a soldier who had fled from the battlefield during the Japanese war only to find death in the jaws of a tiger.

This, according to Father Gennadi, was undeniable proof of the intervention of Providence, which had given the runaway his just deserts, since the tiger, against all common practice, had not devoured the man but contented itself with tearing him to pieces and then stalking away.

This sermon made a big impression on some of the boys. During recess Khrestka Toropigin timidly suggested that perhaps the tiger was not a tiger at all but the Archangel Michael in disguise.

Simka Gorbushkin, however, was dubious on that score. He said that Michael had a different manner of attack: he didn't use his teeth but smote with his sword or pierced with his spear.

The majority agreed with him because one of the religious paintings on the wall of our classroom depicted a battle between the angels and the forces of Hell, and Archangel Michael was shown impaling four writhing devils on a spear, while three others were scampering off with bristling tails to their nether retreat.

Two days later I was informed that the teachers' council had decided to give me only a "Fair" in deportment for dodging punishment. This meant I would be expelled after my very next reprimand.

Three days later I was notified that my mother was to pay my tuition fee for the first semester immediately and in full. She had had to

pay only half the sum before, since I was the son of a soldier.

Hard days came my way. The disreputable nickname of "son of a deserter" stuck to me like a leech. Many of the boys stopped associating with me. Others talked to me and did not keep aloof, but their attitude was as if I had lost a leg in an accident, or somebody in my house had died. Gradually I dropped away from everybody; I stopped joining in the games, taking part in the fights with other classes, and visiting my school-mates.

I spent the long autumn evenings at home or with Timka Shtukin and his birds.

Timka and I became fast friends during that period. His father was always very kind to me. Only I couldn't understand why he sometimes looked at me sidewise with a penetrating glance, came up to me and patted my head, and then walked away, jingling his keys, without saying a word.

Strange, exciting times set in. The population of our town doubled. The lines outside the stores stretched for blocks. Crowds gathered at every street corner. Procession after procession marched along the streets with miracle-working icons. All sorts of ridiculous rumours cropped up. First that the Old Believers who lived along the lakes up the Seryozha River were moving into the

woods. Then that down by the hills the Gypsies were circulating counterfeit money, and everything was so dear because so much counterfeit money had been printed. Once the alarming news got about that on the following Friday night "the Jews would be beaten up" because their espionage and treason were dragging out the war.

Tramps flocked into town from nobody knows where. Stories went around that a padlock had been broken off here and that an apartment had been cleaned out there. Fifty Cossacks were quartered in town. When the Cossacks rode down the street in close formation, with surly faces and forelocks curling down over their foreheads, singing shrill, wild songs, Mother would back away from the window and say:

"It's a long time since I've. . . . I haven't seen them since 1905. They sit their horses the smart-aleck way they used to in those days."

We had no news from Father. I guessed that he was in Sormovo, near Nizhni Novgorod, but my guess was based on the slim fact that I had heard him questioning Mother minutely about her brother Nicholas, who worked at a car-building plant there.

One day that winter Timka Shtukin came up to me in school and furtively beckoned me over to the side. I was more surprised by his mysteri-

ous manner than interested, and I followed him indifferently to a corner.

Timka glanced about warily and then whispered:

"Come over to our house this evening. My Pa told me to tell you to come absolutely."

"What does he want me for? I bet you're making it up."

"I didn't make anything up. You come and you'll find out."

Timka's expression was grave and even a bit frightened, so I took him at his word.

That evening I set out for the cemetery. A blizzard was raging, and the dim street lights were plastered with snow and barely afforded any light. To reach the copse and the cemetery I had to cross a small field. The sharp little snowflakes pricked my face. I drew my head into my coat collar and strode over the snow-covered path toward the green light of the icon lamp burning over the cemetery gate. I stumbled against a gravestone and fell headlong into the snow. The door of the watchman's lodge was locked. I knocked but nobody answered. I knocked again. This time I heard footsteps approaching the door.

"Who's there?" came the stern, familiar bass of the watchman.

"Open up, Uncle Fyodor, it's me."

"That you, Borka?"

"Uh-huh. Please open the door quick."

I entered the warm room. On the table stood a samovar, a saucer of honey and a loaf of bread. Timka was calmly repairing a bird cage.

"Blizzard?" he asked, glancing at my red, wet face.

"And how!" I answered. "Hurt my foot too. Couldn't see a thing."

Timka laughed. I couldn't understand what he was laughing at, and I looked at him curiously. He laughed still louder, and then I saw he wasn't laughing at me but at something behind me.

I turned to find myself face to face with Uncle Fyodor and — my father.

"He's been here with us two days now," Timka said when we sat down to tea.

"Two days — and you didn't say a word! Timka, what sort of comrade are you after that?"

Timka glanced guiltily first at his father and then at mine, as though seeking their support.

"A regular brick, he is," the watchman said, patting his son on the back with his heavy hand. "A puny little fellow, but absolutely dependable."

Father was in civilian clothes. He was gay and animated. He asked me about school and laughed heartily at my story.

"That's okay," he said. "Don't pay any attention to them. Times are changing, son. Don't you feel it?"

I told him that I felt I'd be kicked out of school after my next reprimand.

"Let them kick you out," he stated coolly. "There's nothing terrible about that; if you've got a head on your shoulders and the desire you'll make out all right, school or no school."

"Pa," I said. "What are you so happy about? You keep laughing all the time. You know, Father Gennadi preached a sermon about you at school and everybody talks about you as if you were as good as dead — and you just laugh!"

Now that I'd become Father's chance accomplice, I spoke to him in a different way, with respect but as to an equal. I could see that he liked it.

"I'm happy because happy times are coming. We've done enough crying. All right, son, run along home. I'll be seeing you again soon."

It was quite late. I said goodbye, put on my coat and went out. But the watchman had no sooner bolted the door than somebody pushed me violently head first into a snowdrift. The next moment I heard tramping feet, whistles and shouts in the storm passage. I jumped up and saw Constable Yevgraph Timofeyevich, whose son Pashka had been in my class in grammar school.

"Hold on," he said, recognizing me and holding me back. "You can't go in there. They'll get

along without you. Here, wipe your face," he added, offering me the edge of his hood. "You haven't hit your head, have you?"

"No, Yevgraph Timofeyevich," I whispered. "What's going to happen to Pa?"

"Your Pa? Nobody told him to go against the law. Can't go against the law, boy, you know that."

Father and the watchman were led out of the house. In their wake straggled Timka, hatless, his coat thrown over his shoulders. He wasn't crying, only shivering strangely.

"Timka," the watchman said sternly. "You spend the night at your godfather's, and tell him to look after the house and see they don't steal anything when they search it."

Father strode along in silence, his chin on his chest. His hands were bound behind him. Catching sight of me, he straightened up and shouted cheerfully:

"It's all right, sonny! Be seeing you! Kiss Mother and Tanyusha for me. Don't worry, kid — happy times are coming!"

# HAPPY TIMES

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## *Chapter One*

ON FEBRUARY 22, 1917, a court-martial of the Sixth Army Corps sentenced Alexei Gorikov, private in the 12th Siberian Rifle Regiment, to be shot for desertion from the theatre of military operations and for conducting pernicious, anti-government propaganda.

On February 25 the sentence was carried out.

On March 2 a telegram from Petrograd announced that insurgent troops and workers had captured the tsar's Winter Palace.

My first good view of the rising conflagration of revolution was afforded by the Polutin estate in flames. I sat in our attic till midnight watching the tongues of fire swirling in the fresh spring breeze. As I fondled the butt of the Mauser, lying warm in my pocket — this was the most precious memento I had of my father — I smiled through tears not yet dried after my heavy loss, rejoicing that "happy times" were on their way.

During the early period of the February revolution our school resembled an ant hill disturbed by a smouldering log. One day after prayers for

victory part of the school choir struck up the usual "God Save Our Tsar," but the other half yelled, "Down with it!" and began to whistle and whoop.

Pandemonium broke loose. The boys broke ranks, somebody threw a bun at the portrait of the tsarina, and the first-year pupils, happy at a chance to make noise without being punished, meowed and bleated for all they were worth.

The dazed inspector tried in vain to outshout the throng. Only after Semyon the watchman had taken down the royal portraits did the caterwauling and yowling cease. The excited boys stamped off to their classrooms. Red ribbons appeared from out of nowhere. The seniors demonstratively shoved their trousers into their high boots (which was against the rules), got together outside the lavatory, and lit up cigarettes under the very noses of their home-room teachers. When Balagushin, the gymnastics teacher and an officer to boot, came over to them he was treated to a cigarette. He did not decline. Everybody cheered at this unprecedented union of the authorities and the pupils.

At first, the only thing we understood in this welter of events was that the tsar had been overthrown and a revolution was on. But why we had to rejoice at a revolution, and what was so good about the overthrow of the tsar, before

whose portrait the choir had been singing the anthem with such feeling only a few days earlier — this was not yet clear to most of the boys, especially the juniors.

The first few days there were hardly any studies. The seniors joined the militia. They were issued rifles and red armbands, and they strutted about the streets maintaining order in the town. Nobody, however, had the slightest intention of disturbing order. The bells of the thirty churches rang as at Easter. The priests, clad in glittering vestments, pledged allegiance to the Provisional Government.

People began to sport red shirts. Arkhangel'sky, the son of Father Johann and a student at a divinity school, as well as two village school-teachers and three others whom I did not know, announced that they were Socialist-Revolutionaries. People also began to appear in black shirts; the majority of these were senior students at the teachers' training college and the divinity school. They called themselves Anarchists.

Most of the people in town immediately sided with the Socialist-Revolutionaries. This was due in no small degree to the fact that in a public sermon following prayers for long life to the Provisional Government, Father Paul, who officiated at the cathedral, announced that Jesus Christ had also been a Socialist and a revolu-

tionary. When the pious townspeople, most of them merchants, craftsmen, monks and pilgrims, heard this interesting piece of information about Christ, they immediately became sympathetically inclined toward the Socialist-Revolutionaries, especially since the Socialist-Revolutionaries did not air their views on religion but confined themselves to talk about freedom and the necessity of continuing the war with fresh vigour. The Anarchists expressed the same opinion about the war but had nothing good to say about God.

There was a divinity school student named Velikanov, for instance, who made a speech in public in which he declared there was no God; if there were a God, he said, then let Him accept his, Velikanov's challenge, and show how almighty He was. At these words Velikanov thrust his chin out and spat toward the sky. The crowd gasped, expecting the heavens to split asunder and disgorge thunder and lightning onto the head of the infidel. But when the heavens did not open up, voices arose from the crowd asking if it would not be better to give the Anarchist a sock in the jaw while they were waiting for the Lord to mete out His punishment. At this, Velikanov quickly climbed off the platform and took to his heels, with just one push from Maremyana Sergeyevna, a spiteful old pilgrim woman who sold holy oil from the lamps

before the Sarov Madonna icon and wafers with which St. Serafim of Sarov had fed wild bears and wolves with his own hands.

In general, I was amazed at the incredibly large number of revolutionaries that cropped up in Arzamas. Absolutely everybody was a revolutionary. Even Zakharov, the former rural prefect, wore a huge red silk bow in his lapel. In Petrograd and Moscow battles were being fought and the police were firing at people from roofs, but here the police voluntarily surrendered their guns, donned mufti, and sauntered peacefully about the town.

At a street meeting one day I ran into Yevgraph Timofeyevich, the constable who had assisted in the arrest of my father.

He was coming from market with a bottle of vegetable oil and a head of cabbage in his basket, and had stopped to listen to what the Socialists were saying. He touched his cap and bowed politely.

"How are you?" he asked. "So . . . you've also come to hear them talk? That's the spirit — listen to them. Your time's ahead! Even we old folk find it interesting. Look at how things have turned out!"

I said:

"Do you remember, Yevgraph Timofeyevich, the time you came to arrest my father? You said

there was law and order, and nobody must go against it. Where is your law now? It's gone, and all you policemen will be brought to trial too."

He chuckled amiably, and the oil in the neck of the bottle swirled.

"There was law and order before, and we'll have it again. You can't get along without law, young man. And as to our being brought to trial — let them go ahead. They won't hang us. They don't even hang our chiefs. His Majesty the emperor himself is only under house arrest, so where do we small fry come in? There, you hear what that man says? He says we ought to do away with revenge, that men should live like brothers and do away with prisons and executions in free Russia. And that means there won't be any prisons or executions for us."

He picked up his basket and waddled off.

I stared at his retreating back and thought: "What does he mean, do away with revenge? That if my father had managed to escape, he would let his prison guard walk about free and unharmed just because men should live like brothers? Not much!"

I talked to Fedka about it.

"What's it got to do with your father?" he said. "Your father was a deserter, and there would've been a blot on his name anyway."

They're after deserters now too. A deserter isn't a revolutionary; he's just a runaway who doesn't want to defend his country."

"My father wasn't a coward," I replied, blanching. "That's a lie, Fedka! My father was shot for running away and for propaganda too. We've got the sentence at home."

This disconcerted Fedka, and he replied in a conciliatory tone:

"You don't think I made it up, do you? It's in all the papers. You just read Kerensky's speech in the *Russkoye Slovo*. It's a dandy speech! When they read it out at a general meeting in the girls' school half the hall was in tears. It says about the war that we've got to fight to the last drop, that deserters are the shame of the army and that 'over the graves of those who fell in the struggle with the Germans, free Russia will erect a monument of undying glory.' That's just what it said: 'undying.' And you're arguing with me!"

Hoarse orators took the platform one after another to speak about Socialism. Those wishing to join the party and volunteer for the front were signed up on the spot. Some orators did not stop speaking until they were pushed off and others put up in their stead.

As I listened to them I felt my head swelling up like an empty cow's bladder. I couldn't get

the speeches straight. And I just couldn't distinguish a Socialist-Revolutionary from a Constitutional-Democrat, a Constitutional-Democrat from a People's Socialist, or a *Trudovik*\* from an Anarchist. As a matter of fact, I remembered only one word out of all the speeches:

"Freedom. . . . Freedom. . . . Freedom. . . ."

"Gorikov," said somebody behind me, and I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I turned around to face Jackdaw, our old carpentry teacher.

"Where have you come from?" I asked. I was overjoyed to see him.

"From Nizhni Novgorod. Just out of prison. Come round to my place, dear boy. I've rented a room not far from here. We'll have some tea with bread and honey. I'm so glad I bumped into you. I arrived yesterday and was going to look you up today."

He took my hand and we elbowed our way through the noisy crowd.

At the next square we ran into another gathering. Here people were swarming around several bonfires.

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\* *Trudoviki*: A petty-bourgeois group formed in 1906 consisting of part of the peasant members of the First State Duma headed by Socialist-Revolutionary intellectuals.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much," Jackdaw said with a smile. "The Anarchists are burning up tsarist flags. It would have been a better idea to tear up the bunting and hand the pieces out to the people. The muzhiks are pretty sore. You know how precious each bit of cloth is nowadays."

Jackdaw's hands were long and lean. As he brewed the tea he spoke rapidly, smiling every now and then.

"Your father gave me a letter for you — we were in the same jail until the day he was shipped off to be tried. Only I haven't got it on me: it's among my things at the railroad station."

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said as we drank our tea. "You were saying that you and Father were comrades in the party. Was he really a party member? He never told me about it."

"He didn't because he couldn't."

"And you didn't say anything either. You know, when you were arrested Petka Zolotukhin said you were a spy."

Jackdaw burst out laughing.

"A spy? Ha-ha-ha! Petka Zolotukhin? Ha-ha! One can forgive Zolotukhin, because he's a foolish boy, but when older fools spread the rumour that we're spies — that really is funny, my boy!"

"Who's 'we,' Semyon Ivanovich?"

"The Bolsheviks."

I looked at him askance.

"You mean you're really Bolsheviks — what I mean to say is — does that mean Father was a Bolshevik too?"

"Of course."

"Why couldn't he be like everybody else?" I cried in dismay after a few moments' thought.

"Like everybody else?"

"Yes. Other soldiers are like soldiers, and if they're revolutionaries then they're revolutionaries and nobody says anything bad about them, everybody respects them. But Father goes and becomes a deserter, and then a Bolshevik besides. Why did he have to become a Bolshevik and not a regular revolutionary, like a Socialist-Revolutionary, say, or an Anarchist? But no, he had to go and become a Bolshevik. I could've told people he was shot for being a revolutionary, and nobody would've said anything or pointed a finger at me. But if I tell them he was shot for being a Bolshevik — everybody'll say 'good riddance to bad rubbish,' because in the papers it says that the Bolsheviks are hired by the Germans and that their Lenin works for Wilhelm."

"Just who is this 'everybody' you're talking

about?" asked Jackdaw, who had been smiling all through my outburst.

"Oh — everybody. Everybody I meet. All the neighbours, and Father Gennadi in his sermons, and all the people making speeches."

"Your neighbours! Those speakers!" Jackdaw snorted. "Silly boy! How can you compare those neighbours of yours and those speakers with a real revolutionary like your father? Who are your neighbours? Monks, flour-dealers, merchants, pilgrims, butchers and petty philistines. The trouble is it's hard to find a really decent person among those neighbours of yours. We don't even bother to agitate among that crowd. Let those red-shirt windbags scrape and shuffle before them. We might as well save our breath because those monks and flour-dealers will never help us anyway! You just wait — I'll take you along to where we hold our meetings — to the shanties where wounded men are lying, to the soldiers' barracks, to the railroad station, to the villages. You listen to what they say there! Neighbours indeed!"

Jackdaw laughed.

Timka Shtukin's father was set free soon after the revolution broke out, but he could not get his old job back. Churchwarden Sinyugin ordered him to clear out of the lodge at once and make room for the new watchman.

None of the merchants wanted to hire Timka's father. He went from one to another asking for work as furnaceman or janitor — but nobody would take him.

"I'm helping the Russian army," Sinyugin told him bluntly. "I've donated a thousand rubles to the Red Cross, and I've given over two hundred rubles' worth of gifts, flags and portraits of Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky to the hospitals, while you've been sheltering deserters. I have no job for you."

That was too much for the watchman.

"I thank you very kindly," he retorted. "Only let me tell you that you won't buy yourself off with flags and portraits — your day of reckoning will come, never fear. And don't shout at me," he suddenly flared up. "You think that if you've got a pot-belly and a telescope and feed your crocodile on beef you're the tsar and almighty God combined! You ought to hear what the men at your own factory say. Wondering, they are, whether they've hit you people hard enough, or whether they oughtn't let you have a bit more!"

"You — I'll put you in jail!" shouted the outraged Sinyugin. "So that's how it is! I'll file a complaint against you! My factory is working for the war. The present authorities are pleased with me too, and you — get out of here!"

The watchman pulled on his cap and left.

"Made a revolution, did they? All those rats are still where they were. He should talk, when he mixes with the army chiefs and is on the City Duma. Ought to be given a good hiding, that's what! Patriot, he calls himself," he grumbled as he strode down the street. "Made your thousands on shoddy boots. Bought your son out of military service. Gave the military authorities three hundred and the doctor at the hospital five hundred — even boasted about it when you were drunk! You're all good at getting someone else to do the fighting for you! Bought Alexander Fyodorovich's portraits, you did. Both of you ought to be hanged — you and your Alexander Fyodorovich! Freedom! Bah!"

Everybody seemed to have gone mad. All we heard those days was "Kerensky this and Kerensky that."

Pictures of him were printed daily in the papers. The captions read: "Kerensky delivering a speech." "The people strew Kerensky's path with flowers." "An admiring throng of women carry Kerensky aloft." Feofanov, a member of the Arzamas City Duma, went to Moscow on business and shook hands with Kerensky. Drove of people trailed after Feofanov on his return.

"D'you really mean to say he greeted you like that?"

"Absolutely," replied Feofanov proudly.

"Shook your hand?"

"Shook my right hand, pumped it even, you might say."

"There, you see!" agitated whispers went through the crowd. "The tsar'd never shake a man's hand, but Kerensky does. Thousands of people come to him every day, and he shakes everybody's hand, and before. . . ."

"Before we had the tsar."

"That's right. And now we have freedom!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Long live freedom! Long live Kerensky! Let's send him a wire of greetings."

In those days one out of every ten telegrams sent out by the post office carried greetings to Kerensky. Telegrams were sent by rallies, school conferences, church council meetings, the Duma, the Society of Religious Banner-Bearers. In fact, whenever a few people gathered a telegram of greetings was sure to be sent off.

Once the rumour got about that the Arzamas Society of Amateur Poultry Breeders had not sent the "beloved leader" a single telegram. The chairman of the society, Ofendulin, published an indignant denial in the local weekly.

Ofendulin declared that the rumour was nothing short of malicious calumny. The society, he wrote, had sent two whole telegrams, and the editors corroborated his statement in a footnote to the effect that the esteemed M. Y. Ofendulin had submitted "post office receipts in due form" as proof.

## *Chapter Two*

Several months had passed after my meeting with Jackdaw.

On Salnikova Street, next to the big theological seminary, stood a small house surrounded by a garden. Passers-by, looking into its open windows and glimpsing faces wreathed in cigarette smoke, would quicken their step.

"That's where the agent-provocateurs hold their meetings!" they would spit out angrily when they had put a block between themselves and the house.

This was the Bolshevik Club. There were only about twenty Bolsheviks in the town, but the club was always packed to overflowing. Its doors were open to all. The chief frequenters were soldiers from the hospital, Austrian prisoners and workers from the tannery and the felt factory.

I used to spend most of my free time there too. First I went with Jackdaw out of sheer curiosity, then going there became a habit, and then I was drawn to the place and completely overwhelmed by what I heard there. All the rubbish that had been stuffed into my head fell away like the peel of a potato when it is pared with a sharp knife.

Our Bolsheviks did not take part in the church debates or the meetings of the tradesmen. They drew crowds outside the barracks, in the suburbs and in the war-weary villages.

I remember the meeting I attended in Kamenka.

"We must go!" Jackdaw told me. "There's sure to be a fight! Kruglikov himself is speaking for the Socialist-Revolutionaries. And when he speaks he carries people away. After his speech in Ivanovskoye Village the muzhiks almost beat us up before we could make them understand what we wanted."

"Good, let's go!" I cried. "But why don't you ever carry your revolver with you, Semyon Ivanovich? You always leave it around; either it's in your tobacco can, or in the bread box, like yesterday. Mine is always on me. When I go to bed I put it under my pillow."

Jackdaw laughed, and the shreds of tobacco danced in his quivering beard.

"Oh, you youngster!" he exclaimed. "Just try and use a revolver when you're being beaten up and see what happens to you! Don't worry, kid, when the time comes, we'll produce our revolvers, but meanwhile our best weapon is the spoken word. Baskakov's speaking for us today."

"What!? But Baskakov can't speak! He can hardly put two words together. You can eat a whole dinner while he's hunting for his next word."

"That's how he talks here, but you just listen to him at a meeting!"

The road to Kamenka lay across a rickety old bridge and then past grassy, still unmown meadows, and shallow streams where the tall rushes grew thick. A string of peasant carts was moving along the road from town. Barefoot peasant women were trudging home from market with their empty milk jugs. We did not hurry until a carriage packed with Socialist-Revolutionaries overtook us, and then we accelerated our pace.

Groups of peasants from the neighbouring villages were converging on the square from the wide streets. The meeting had not yet begun but we could hear the hubbub from afar.

I spotted Fedka in the crowd. He was diving in and out, shoving leaflets into people's hands.

When he caught sight of me he came flying up.

"Aha! So you've come too! Gee, won't there be fun today! Here, take some of these and help me hand them out."

He pushed a dozen leaflets into my hand. I glanced at one of them — they were Socialist-Revolutionary leaflets: "Continue the war until victory and down with deserters!" I gave the batch back to him.

"Nothing doing, Fedka. You can hand out these leaflets yourself if you want to."

Fedka spat.

"You're a fool! You with them too?" he asked, jerking his head at Jackdaw and Baskakov. "Swell guy you are, aren't you! and I'd been depending on you!"

With a scornful shrug of his shoulders Fedka disappeared in the crowd.

"Depending on me, he was," I thought, smiling wryly. "Thinks maybe I haven't got a head of my own, huh?"

"Until victory...." I heard someone behind me say in a low voice.

Turning around, I saw a pock-marked peasant standing barefoot and hatless, holding a leaflet in one hand and a torn snaffle bridle in the other. He must have been mending it when he heard the noise and came out to hear what they were saying.

"Until victory — well, well!" he reiterated with a show of surprise and stared at the crowd incredulously. Then he shook his head, sat down on a bench and, poking his finger at the leaflet in his hand, shouted into the ear of an old man beside him:

"Again it's until victory. Since nineteen fourteen — and still it's until victory. What d'you make of it, Grandpa Prokhor?"

A cart was rolled out to the centre of the square. The chairman, elected by no one knows whom, climbed on top. He was a jumpy little fellow.

"Citizens!" he began. "I declare the meeting open. I give the floor to the Socialist-Revolutionary, Comrade Kruglikov, who will speak about the Provisional Government, the war and the current situation."

The chairman jumped down from the cart. The "platform" was empty for several moments. Then Kruglikov suddenly leapt onto it. Towering over cart and audience, he raised his hand. The noise subsided.

"Citizens of great and free Russia! Permit me to convey to you heartfelt greetings on behalf of the party of Socialist-Revolutionaries!"

Then Kruglikov plunged into his speech. I listened carefully, trying not to miss a word.

He spoke of the difficult conditions under which the Provisional Government had to work. The Germans were pressing ahead, there was the front to worry about, and those dark forces — the German spies and Bolsheviks — were agitating for Wilhelm.

"We had Tsar Nicholas and we stand a chance of having Wilhelm. Do you want another tsar?" he asked.

"Hell no!" roared the crowd.

"We're tired of war," Kruglikov continued. "We're fed up with it, aren't we? Isn't it time to finish it?"

"It is!" the crowd chorused.

"What is he preaching somebody else's program for?" I whispered angrily into Jackdaw's ear. "Are they against the war too?"

Jackdaw nudged me in the ribs. "Keep quiet and listen."

"It is! You see," the Socialist-Revolutionary went on, "all of you say so, down to the last man. But the Bolsheviks won't let our war-weary country get a move on and win the war. They're undermining the army, and the army's fighting capacity's giving out. If we had a strong army we could defeat the enemy with one decisive blow and make peace. But now we can't make peace. And who's to blame? Who's to blame

because your sons, brothers, husbands and fathers are rotting away in the trenches instead of returning home to their peaceful labours? Who's putting off victory and dragging out the war? We, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, declare for all to hear: long live the last, decisive blow at the enemy, long live the victory of the revolutionary army over the German hordes, and after that — down with war and long live peace!"

Clouds of tobacco smoke rose from the crowd as the men puffed away in excitement; exclamations of approval were voiced here and there.

Kruglikov now began to speak about the constituent assembly which was to be the master of the country, of the harm wrought by the arbitrary seizure of landowners' estates, and of the necessity of establishing order and carrying out the instructions of the Provisional Government. He skilfully cast a spell over his audience. First he took the side of the peasants, reminding them of their needs. When the crowd began to shout out approvingly, "Right!" "That's true what he's telling us!" "Couldn't be worse!" he began shifting his position imperceptibly. Suddenly it turned out that the crowd, which had just agreed with him that without land the peasant could have no freedom, now concluded

that in a free country you weren't supposed to seize estates from the landowners.

A thunder of applause mixed with curses at the spies and Bolsheviks drowned out the end of his ninety-minute speech.

"Gosh," I thought, "Baskakov isn't any match for Kruglikov! Look at the way they're carrying on."

To my surprise, however, Baskakov, who stood nearby puffing on his pipe, showed no signs whatsoever of climbing on to the platform.

The Socialist-Revolutionaries milling about the cart were also somewhat puzzled by the conduct of the Bolsheviks. After conferring hurriedly they apparently decided that the Bolsheviks were waiting for someone, so they produced another speaker, who turned out to be much weaker than Kruglikov. He faltered, his voice did not carry, and, worst of all, he kept repeating what the previous orator had said. When he climbed down from the cart the applause was less hearty.

Baskakov stood smoking imperturbably. His narrow, slanted eyes were crinkled, and his face wore a simple, good-natured expression, as much as to say: "Let 'em talk. None o' my business. I'm smokin' my pipe and keepin' to myself."

The third speaker was no better than the second, and when he got off the cart most of the audience began to whistle and yell:

"Hey, where's the chairman?"

"Hey, you chump! Let's have the other speakers!"

"Bring them Bolsheviks up! Why don't you let 'em speak?"

The chairman replied indignantly that he was letting anyone speak who wanted to, but that the Bolsheviks most likely weren't asking for the floor because they were afraid, and he couldn't make them speak against their will.

"If you can't, we can!"

"Made a mess and now they're trying to hide!"

"Drag 'em up by the collar! Let 'em tell the public the whole story!"

The clamour frightened me. I looked at Jackdaw. He was smiling, but his face was pale.

"Baskakov," he said, "that's enough. Things may end badly if you don't go up."

Baskakov cleared his throat with a rumble, put his pipe in his pocket and waddled up to the cart through an opening made by the angry crowd.

He did not begin to speak at once but glanced

indifferently at the Socialist-Revolutionaries grouped around the cart and wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Then he cast his eyes over the crowd and shot out his huge fist doubled in a sign of contempt.

"Ever seen this?" he asked calmly in a loud and derisive voice.

I was taken aback by his unusual beginning. The peasants were also perplexed.

The next instant indignant shouts rang out.

"Hey, what the — — —?"

"Who d'you think yer showin' it to?"

"Better use yer tongue and drop that fist, or we'll show you!"

"Ever seen this?" Baskakov began again. "Well, don't be so upset then. They'll" — here Baskakov jerked his head at the Socialist-Revolutionaries — "they'll show you one better!"

"What d'you know about that," drawled Baskakov, cocking his eye and shaking his head. "What d'you know about that! Lapping it all up, aren't you, citizens of free Russia! Can you tell me, though, dear citizens, what you're gettin' out of this revolution? Is the war still on? It is. Have you got any land yet? No, you haven't. Is the landowner still around? He is. Sure he is. He should care! Who d'you think you're scarin' with your big noise? This govern-

ment we've got now won't touch the landowner. Go and ask the Vodovатов peasants. They tried to take some of their landowner's estate and found troops there. So they stamped around a bit and then went off. Swell bit of land, but try and bite a chunk out of it! You say you've been stickin' it out for three hundred years. It looks as if you ain't had enough, you're itchin' to stick it out some more. Okay, then, stick it out. The Lord God likes patient souls. Sit around and wait till the landowner comes scrapin' up to you and begs you to take a bit of land from him. Only will you be able to wait that long? Have you heard that when that constituent assembly gets together they'll talk about whether they should give the peasants land for money or without? Run along now and count your money — have you got enough to buy some land? Is that what you think the revolution was for — to buy your own land off the landowners? What the hell did you want the revolution for, if that's how it's gonna be! Can't you buy land for your money without a revolution?"

"What's this you're talkin' about?" alarmed and angry voices rose from the crowd.

"Here's what I'm talkin' about." Baskakov pulled a crumpled leaflet out of his pocket and read: "'Justice demands that the landowner be remunerated for the land which passes over from

him to the peasant.' That's what I'm talkin' about. The Constitutional-Democrats wrote this, and they'll be sitting in that assembly too. And they'll stick up for their policy. But we Bolsheviks say straight and simple: we don't want to wait for any assembly, let's have the land now, without talk, delays or payment! Enough's enough — we've paid for it already!"

"You said it!" growled the crowd.

"To hell with all the talkin'! Looks like we're being cheated again."

"Shut up, for God's sake! Let the Bolshevik talk! Maybe he'll tell us some more about it."

I stood open-mouthed beside Jackdaw. A feeling of joy and of pride in Baskakov welled up in me.

"Semyon Ivanovich!" I cried, tugging at his sleeve. "I didn't know — I couldn't imagine — he's not even making a speech; he's just talking to them."

"What a fine, clever fellow Baskakov is!" I thought, listening as his calm, weighty words fell into the thick of the agitated crowd.

"Peace after victory?" Baskakov was saying. "Well, it ain't a bad idea. Say we capture Constantinople. Christ, but don't we need that Constantinople! Or say we capture Berlin. I ask you" — here Baskakov prodded the little pock-marked peasant with the bridle, who had wormed

his way up to the platform. "I ask you now did the German or the Turk borrow anything from you that he won't give back? Please tell me, my dear man: what business have you got down in Constantinople? Are you going to take your potatoes down there to sell at the market? Come on, speak up!"

The little pock-marked peasant reddened, blinked and spread out his arms.

"I don't need it at all," he replied indignantly. "What do I want it for?"

"You don't want it, I don't want it, and they don't want it! But the merchants want it, so they can do business and make money, see? Well, if they want it so much, then let 'em fight for it! What's the peasant got to do with it? What did they drive half your village to the front for? So that the merchants could rake in more money! Fools you are, nothing but fools! Great big bearded fellows like you, and anybody can take and twist you around his little finger."

"You're right there, by God!" whispered the pock-marked peasant, thumping himself on the chest. "They can, too." And heaving a deep sigh, he hung his head.

"That's why we're tellin' you," Baskakov concluded, "not to wait for peace till after victory, till Kingdom Come, till thousands more workers and peasants get mashed up into a pulp, but to

make peace now, without any victories. We haven't won out against the landowners here at home yet. Am I right, brothers? Well, if anybody doesn't think so, let him come up here and say I've told a lie. As for me, I haven't got anything else to say to you."

The crowd roared and groaned. Kruglikov, his face pale, jumped up, waved his arms about and shouted. He was pushed off the cart. Baskakov stood beside him and puffed on his pipe while the pock-marked peasant who didn't want Constantinople pulled at his sleeve, urging him to come home with him for tea.

"It'll be with honey!" he pleaded. "I've got a little left. Don't refuse me, comrade! And let those friends of yours come along too."

We drank raspberry tea. The little house was rich with the fragrance of honeycombs. The carriage packed with Socialist-Revolutionaries rolled along the dusty road past the windows of the house on its way back to town. Towards evening it grew dry and sultry. Bells pealed in the distance. In the town's thirty churches black-robed monks prayed that peace might come to a land in revolt.

*Chapter Three*

I went to the cemetery to say goodbye to Timka Shtukin.

Timka and his father were leaving for the Ukraine, where his uncle had a small farm near the city of Zhitomir.

Their bags were packed. Timka's father had gone off for the cart. Timka seemed to be in a gay mood. He was unable to stand still, but kept running from corner to corner, as though he wanted to have a last good look at the walls within which he had grown up. It seemed to me, however, that Timka was not really happy, that he was having a hard time keeping back the tears. He had freed all his birds.

"Every single one of them! They all flew away," he said. "The robin and the bullfinches and the goldfinches and the siskin. You know, Borka, I liked the siskin best. He was absolutely tame. When I opened the door of the cage he wouldn't fly out. I touched him with a stick and he flew up into a poplar and began to sing! Boy, did he sing! I hung his cage on a branch and sat down under the tree. I sat there a long time thinking about how we'd lived here, and about my birds, and about the cemetery, and about the school, and how everything's come to an end and now we have to leave. Then I finally got up and

was about to take the cage when what do I see but my little siskin sitting on it! He'd come down and perched on it, and didn't want to fly away. And then I felt so bad, Borka, that I — I nearly cried."

"Go on, Timka," I said with feeling. "I bet you did cry."

"Yeah, I really did," Timka admitted in a shaking voice. "You see, Borka, I'm used to this place. I feel terrible about our being kicked out. You know, I even went to see churchwarden Sinyugin to beg him to let us stay. Pa doesn't know about it. But it didn't work." Timka sighed and turned away. "Sinyugin should care. Look at the house he's got."

Timka uttered the last words almost in a whisper and suddenly ran into the next room. When I followed him after a few moments I found him crying into a big bundle of bedding.

At the railroad station Timka and his father were swallowed up at once by the mass of humanity rushing toward the train which had just pulled in.

"He'll be crushed," I worried. "Where in the world are they all going to anyway?"

The platform was practically spilling over. There were many soldiers, officers and sailors among the crowd. "At least they're used to it,

and they're in the forces, but where are those people going?" I thought, looking at the groups of civilians with boxes, baskets and suitcases piled around them. They seemed to be leaving in whole families. There were clean-shaven, angry men, their foreheads beaded with perspiration from anxiety and dashing about. There were aristocratic-looking women with a lost and tired look in their eyes. There were old-fashioned matrons in fantastic hats, stunned by the uproar, but obstinate and irritated.

An old lady who looked like a grand duchess out of the movies was perched on a huge suitcase, on my left. She had one hand on a strapped bundle of bedding, and the other on a cage with a parrot in it. She was shouting something to a young naval officer who was trying to move a heavy trunk.

"Oh, leave me alone," he cried, "where do you think I can get a porter? Oh, hell! I say!" he yelled, letting go of the trunk and turning to a soldier passing by. "Hey, you! Give us a hand with loading these things, will you!"

Caught unawares, the soldier submitted to the tone of command in the officer's voice. He stopped at once and stood at attention. But almost immediately he relaxed, as though ashamed of his undue haste and conscious of the derisive eyes of his comrades. He stuck his hand leisurely

inside his belt, screwed up his eyes, and gave the officer a sly look.

"It's you I'm talking to," the officer repeated. "You haven't gone deaf, have you?"

"Not at all, sir. I ain't deaf, but it ain't my business to lug your wardrobes about."

With that the soldier turned his back on the officer and ambled off.

"Gregoire!" the old lady screamed, her faded eyes almost popping out of their sockets. "Gregoire, find a gendarme and have this ruffian arrested at once!"

The officer made a hopeless gesture.

"Oh, Lord, why must you interfere?" Then suddenly his tone changed. "What are you talking about?" he snapped. "What gendarme? From the other world? Please sit still and keep quiet."

Suddenly Timka poked his head out of a window.

"Hey, Borka, here we are!"

"Well, how's it inside?"

"Not so bad. We're all fixed up. Pa's sitting on the things, and a sailor's put me in his upper berth, at his feet. Only he says not to move or he'll push me off."

The second bell startled the crowd into still greater commotion. Choice swearwords mingled with French phrases, the scent of perfume with

the odour of sweat, the strains of an accordion with someone's sobs — and then all this was drowned out by the train whistle.

"G'bye, Tim-ka!"

"G-bye, Bor-ka!" he shouted, sticking out his curly head and waving his hand.

The train disappeared, carrying away a polyglot crowd from many walks of life, but the station seemed just as jammed as before.

"Just look at the crowd!" someone exclaimed behind me. "And they're all going South, everybody's going South. To Rostov, to the Don. When the northbound train comes in there's nobody but soldiers and officials around the place, but as soon as the southbound pulls in — why, you can't see the platform for the ladies and gents!"

"Where they going to, the resorts?"

"Resorts is right!" came a mocking voice. "They're off to cure their fears. Nowadays the bigwigs are sick with fear!"

I made my way toward the exit past crates, trunks and sacks, past people drinking tea, nibbling sunflower seeds, sleeping, laughing, cursing.

Suddenly, the lame newsdealer Semyon Yakovlevich sprang out of the crowd. Clumping down the length of the platform with amazing speed on his wooden leg, he piped in his shrill voice:

"Fresh papers! *Russkoye Slovo*! Staggering details about the demonstration of the Bolsheviks! The government disperses the Bolshevik demonstration! Killed and wounded! Search for the chief Bolshevik, Lenin, yields no results!"

People tore the papers out of his hands without bothering to ask for their change.

I set off on my way back along a narrow path running through a field of ripening rye to the right of the highway. As I descended the gully I caught sight of a man coming down the opposite slope toward me. He was bending under a heavy burden. I immediately saw that it was Jackdaw.

"Boris!" he shouted. "What are you doing here? Coming from the railroad station?"

"Yes, but where are you going, Semyon Ivanovich? If you're trying to make the train you're out of luck. It's left already."

"Carpentry teacher" Jackdaw came to a halt, plopped his heavy bundle onto the grass, and dropped down beside it.

"That's a fine how do you do! What'll I do with this stuff now?" He kicked the bundle with his foot.

"What's in it?"

"All sorts of things — literature . . . and a couple of other things."

"Okay, then, let me help you carry it back. You can leave it at the club and pick it up tomorrow."

Jackdaw shook his black beard, which was sprinkled as usual with shreds of tobacco.

"That's the whole trouble, brother. I can't take it back to the club. It's goodbye club. There isn't any more club."

"What!" I almost jumped. "Did it burn down? Why, I passed by it just this morning on the way here!"

"No, brother, it hasn't burned down. It's been closed down. Good thing our fellows let us know beforehand. The place is being searched right now."

I was at a loss.

"Semyon Ivanovich, what's happened? Who could close the club down? We haven't got the old regime any more. We have freedom now, haven't we? The Socialist-Revolutionaries have their club, and the Mensheviks and the Constitutional-Democrats have theirs too; and the Anarchists are always drunk—they boarded up their windows from the outside and still nobody gave a hoot. But our club was so nice and quiet and they go and close it down!"

"Freedom!" Jackdaw said with a smile. "For some there's freedom and for others there isn't. What can I do with this bundle? I ought to hide

it somewhere until tomorrow. I can't lug it back to town because they might take it away."

"All right, let's hide it, Semyon Ivanovich. I know a place nearby. A little way down the gully there's a pond, and to the side there's a sort of hollow where they used to dig up clay for bricks. There's lots of pits in it — you can hide a whole horse and cart there, let alone a bundle. Only they say the place is full of snakes, and I'm barefoot. You can go because you've got shoes on. Even if they bite you you won't die — it'll only knock you out a bit."

Jackdaw did not seem to relish this last piece of information. He asked me if I knew another hiding-place nearby — one without snakes.

I told him I didn't, and that there were people all around — grazing cattle or weeding their potatoes — and kids loitering about near other people's gardens.

Jackdaw swung his bundle onto his back, and we tramped along the bank of the creek.

We hid the bundle safely away.

"You run back to town now," Jackdaw said. "I'll come here myself tomorrow. If you see any members of the committee tell them I'm still here. Just a minute." He stopped me and gave me a searching look. "You won't, er —" here he shook his finger in my face, "go babbling around, will you, brother?"

"Oh, Semyon Ivanovich!" I muttered, stung to the quick. "What do you mean! Do you really think I ever — about anybody? Even in school I never — even in games — and this is serious, and you...."

Jackdaw did not let me finish. He patted me on the back with his lean, strong hand.

"Okay, kid," he said with a smile. "Run along Ekh, you conspirator!"

#### *Chapter Four*

Fedka had grown and matured during the summer. He had let his hair grow long, went in for black Russian shirts and sported a file folder stuffed with newspapers which he carried about with him to school meetings and conferences. Fedka was chairman of the class committee. Fedka was the delegate from our school to the girls' school. Fedka was the students' representative at parents' meetings. He had acquired the knack of making fancy speeches — in fact, he sounded almost like Kruglikov. He would get up on a desk and speak in debates on topics such as "May students answer the teacher sitting down or must they answer standing up?" and "Is card playing during bible classes permissible in a free country?" He would thrust one foot forward,

stick his hand inside his belt and begin: "Citizens, we call upon you... the circumstances oblige us... we bear responsibility for the fate of the revolution...." And more in the same vein.

Fedka and I somehow could not get along. It had not yet come to an open break, but our relations were becoming more strained from day to day.

Once again I became an outcast.

The boys had already begun to forget that business of my father and the ice was thawing between some of my former comrades and myself. Then a new cold wind blew in from the capital. The local residents got mad at the Bolsheviks and closed down the club. The Duma militia arrested Baskakov, and again I turned out to be in the wrong: I had hung around the Bolsheviks, I had put the flag up over their club on May 1, I had refused at a meeting to help Fedka hand out leaflets championing war until victory.

Everybody was handing out leaflets. Some of the boys grabbed all the leaflets they could — making no distinction between the Constitutional-Democrat, Anarchist, Christian-Socialist and Bolshevik — and distributed them as they came. But nothing ever happened to them — as if what they were doing was quite in the order of things!

How could I take any Socialist-Revolutionary

leaflets from Fedka, when Baskakov had just given me a whole batch of his proclamations? How could I hand out both? If there had been the least similarity between them! But one said, "Long live victory over the Germans," while the other said, "Down with the predatory war!" One said, "Support the Provisional Government!" while the other said, "Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers!" How could you lump them together, when they were so at loggerheads?

We didn't do much studying those days. The teachers were too busy attending meetings at their various clubs, and the out-and-out monarchists among them handed in their resignations. Half of the school building was turned over to the Red Cross.

"I'm going to quit school, Mother," I used to say. "We aren't really studying, anyway, and everybody hates my guts. Yesterday, for instance, Korenev was making the rounds with his cup to collect money for the wounded. I had twenty kopeks on me, so I dropped them in. You should have seen the face he made! 'Our country,' he says, 'can do without charity from adventurists.' I nearly bit a hole in my lips. He'd said that in front of everybody! I told him, 'I may be the son of a deserter, but you're the son of a thief. Your father's a contractor and robbed the army on supplies, and I wouldn't put it beyond you to be

making a little on the side out of this collection for the wounded.' After that we nearly had a fight. In a couple of days they're bringing me up before a students' trial. I should care. I don't give a hang for their judges!"

I never parted with the Mauser Father had given me. It was small and handy and had a soft holster of suède. I didn't carry it around for protection — nobody intended attacking me as yet — but because I treasured it as a remembrance of my father; it was a gift from him, and my only precious possession. Besides, the Mauser gave me a thrill and a feeling of pride. I was fifteen at the time, and I didn't know then, as I still don't know now, of any boy of that age who would not want to own a real revolver. Fedka was the only one who knew about it. I had shown it to him back in the days of our friendship. I remember how envious he had been when he saw it.

The day after my quarrel with Korenev I entered the classroom without saying hello or looking at anybody, as had been my practice of late.

Our first class was geography. After he had told us a bit about Western China, the teacher passed on to the latest news. While we were arguing and talking I noticed that Fedka was writing notes and passing them around. Over

my neighbour's shoulder I caught sight of my name at the beginning of one of these notes. This immediately put me on my guard.

When the bell rang for recess I got up and headed for the door, keeping my eye on the boys around me. Before I got to it, however, I found a cordon of the strongest fellows in our class barring my way. Fedka stepped out of the centre of the semi-circle that had closed in on me.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Hand over your revolver," he said insolently. "The class committee has moved that you hand your revolver over to the commissariat of the Duma militia. Give it to the committee at once and tomorrow you'll get a receipt from the militia."

"What revolver are you talking about?" I asked, backing away toward the window and trying my best to look calm.

"Don't try to put anything over on us. I happen to know that you always carry your Mauser on you. You've got it in your right-hand pocket right now. Better hand it over voluntarily, or we'll call in the militia. Let's have it!" He stretched out his hand.

"My Mauser?"

"Yes."

"And how about this?" I snapped, showing

him my fist. "Did you give it to me? No. Well, then, beat it before I give you a sock in the jaw!"

Swiftly turning my head around, I saw four boys ready to seize me at any moment. I leapt forward in an attempt to get to the door, but Fedka grabbed me by the shoulder. I hit him and was immediately gripped round the shoulders and chest. Somebody tried to jerk my hand out of my pocket. I took a good grip on the butt of the revolver.

"They'll take it away!" I thought. "Now they'll take it away!"

Then I squealed like a cub caught in a trap. I pulled out my Mauser, released the safety catch with my thumb and pressed the trigger.

The four pairs of hands holding me immediately fell away. I jumped onto the windowsill. From there I could see the cotton-white faces of the boys, the yellow square of the stone floor which had been cracked by the bullet, and Father Gennadi standing in the doorway like the Biblical pillar of salt. Without hesitating, I dropped from the second floor into a bed of bright red dahlias.

Late that evening I climbed up the rain pipe on the garden side of our house to get to the window of my room. I tried to make as little noise as possible so as not to frighten the people inside, but my mother heard me and looked out of the window.

"Who's there? Is that you, Boris?" she asked in a soft voice.

"It's me, Ma."

"Don't climb up the pipe — you might fall. Get along to the front. I'll open the door for you."

"No, don't, Ma. You don't have to...."

I jumped down into the room and stood still, expecting her to scold me.

"Hungry?" she asked in the same soft voice. "Sit down and I'll bring you some soup. It's still warm."

I decided that Mother did not know anything. I kissed her and sat down at the table, casting about for a way of telling her of what had happened. As I absent-mindedly ate the soup, which had gone slightly sour, I felt Mother's eyes on me. This made me uneasy, and I put my spoon down.

"The inspector was here," she said. "He said they were expelling you from school, and that if you don't hand your revolver over to the militia by noon tomorrow they'll inform the militia about it, and it will be taken away by force. Boris, give it to them!"

"I won't," I replied obstinately, without looking up at her. "Father gave it to me."

"What's the difference? What do you want it for? You can get another one later on. Mauser or no Mauser, you've been acting crazy

enough the last few months, and if you don't take care you might shoot someone yet. Hand it over to them tomorrow."

"No," I replied quickly, pushing away my plate. "I don't want another one, I want this one! Father gave it to me. And I'm not acting crazy; I'm not hurling anybody. They started it themselves. I don't care if they do expel me; I was going to quit anyway. I'll hide it away but I won't give it up."

"Good God!" Mother exclaimed. Now she was irritated. "Don't you see you might be arrested and locked up until you give it to them?"

"Let them arrest me!" I cried. "They arrested Baskakov and they can lock me up too, but I won't hand it over."

"I won't!" I suddenly exploded a few seconds later. Mother gave a start.

"All right, all right, don't give it up," she said in a milder tone. "I should worry." She said no more and sat there lost in thought. Then she rose from the table. At the door she added bitterly, "The two of you have made me grow old before my time."

I was surprised that Mother had given in so easily. It wasn't like her at all. Mother rarely interfered in my affairs, but if she wanted to have her way she wouldn't rest a moment until she got it.

That night I slept soundly. I dreamt that Timka brought me a cuckoo. "What do I want a cuckoo for, Timka?" I said. Timka made no reply. "Cuckoo, cuckoo, how old am I?" The bird cuckooed seventeen times. "You're wrong," I said. "I'm only fifteen." "No," Timka said. "Your mother fooled you." "But why should she fool me?" And suddenly I saw that it was not Timka at all but Fedka, standing there and sneering at me.

I woke up, jumped out of bed and glanced into the next room. It was five minutes to seven. Mother was not there. I had to hurry and hide the Mauser in the garden.

I pulled on my shirt and snatched up my trousers. Suddenly cold shivers ran down my spine: the trousers were curiously light! Then, very carefully, as if afraid to burn my fingers, I reached into the pocket. Yes, the Mauser was gone! While I was asleep Mother had taken it away.

"So that's how it is! So that's what! So she's against me too! And I'd trusted her yesterday. Now I know why she let me off so easy! She must have taken it to the militia."

I dashed to the door.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" the clock chimed. I stopped short and looked up at it. Where was I going to anyway? It was only seven o'clock.

Where could she have gone? I peered into all the corners of the room and noticed that the big wicker basket wasn't there. Mother must have left for market.

But if she had gone to market she wouldn't have taken the Mauser with her, would she? Which meant she had hidden it somewhere in the house! But where? Why, of course! In the top drawer of the bureau, because it was the only drawer that locked.

Then I remembered that one day long ago Mother had brought some pink bichloride of mercury pills home from the druggist's and hidden them out of harm's way in that drawer. Fedka and I had wanted to poison Simakov's red cat to avenge our dog, whose paw he had hurt. We had rummaged in the iron scrap box, found a key which fitted the lock of the drawer, and taken out one of the pills. Then we had flung the key back into the scrap box.

I went into the storeroom and pulled out the heavy box. There, in the pile of nuts, screws and sundry other scrap, I found three rusty keys after first having cut my hand on a jagged piece of tin. One of them looked as if it would fit.

I returned to the bureau. The key did not slip in easily. Click! The lock turned. I pulled out the drawer. Yes, there was the Mauser. The

holster lay separate. I took both out. Then I shut the drawer, threw the key out of the window into the garden and left the house. Casting a swift glance about me in the street, I saw Mother coming back from market. I turned the corner and ran off toward the cemetery.

At the fringe of the copse I stopped to catch my breath. I flung myself down on a pile of dry leaves, breathing heavily and glancing about as though someone were after me. A little brook flowed noiselessly at my feet. The water was clear but tepid, and smelled of seaweed. Without rising, I scooped up some water and drank it, then leaned my head on my hand and thought hard.

What was I to do now? I couldn't go home, and I couldn't go to school. On the other hand, I suppose I really could go home and hide the Mauser. Mother would be upset awhile, but then she'd get over it. It was her own fault, after all — why did she have to go and take the revolver? What if they came around from the militia? If I said I'd lost it they wouldn't believe me. If I said it wasn't mine they'd want to know whose it was. If I didn't say anything they might really arrest me! What a louse that Fedka was!

I could see the railroad station through the sparse trees.

Oo-oo-oo-oooh! came the echo of a distant train whistle. A curly wisp of white smoke straggled over the roadbed and a little black beetle of a locomotive slowly appeared from around a bend.

Oo-oo-oo-oooh! the locomotive screamed again as it greeted the extended hand of the semaphore.

"What if I were to...."

I rose slowly and reflected.

And the more I reflected the more the railroad station appealed to me. It beckoned me with its shrill whistles, the long, drawn-out signals from the switchmen's booths, the almost tangible odour of burning oil, and the endless tracks that pierced the strange and distant horizon.

"I'll go to Nizhni Novgorod," I said to myself, "and look up Jackdaw. He's in Sormovo. He'll be glad to see me and he'll take me in for the time being. Later on we'll see what's what. When things quieten down a bit I'll return. Or maybe," a voice within me spoke up, "maybe I won't return."

"Well, that's that," I decided with sudden determination. Conscious of the importance of my decision, I got up feeling strong, big and self-reliant.

*Chapter Five*

The train arrived in Nizhni Novgorod late in the evening. I walked out of the station onto a big square. The bayonets of brand-new rifles flashed in the light of the street lamps; all around me shoulder straps glittered.

A bearded man with red hair was speaking from a platform about the necessity of defending the country. He assured his audience of the speedy defeat of the "rotten German imperialists."

Every now and again he turned to a little old colonel standing by his side, who kept nodding his round bald head approvingly.

The speaker looked dead tired. He beat his chest and waved first one hand and then both, appealing to the soldiers' conscience. At length, when he thought his words had struck home to the grey mass of listeners, he swung his hand out, almost boxing the ear of the startled colonel, and began to sing the Marseillaise in a stentorian voice. A few dozen scattered voices joined in, but the entire column of soldiers remained silent.

At this, the red-headed orator broke off singing, dashed his cap to the ground and climbed down from the platform.

The old colonel stood there a few moments

longer. Then he spread his arms out helplessly, bent his head and walked down the steps, leaning on the hand rail.

This, it turned out, was a battalion leaving for the German front.

The soldiers had marched up to the station singing. On the way they had been showered with flowers and gifts. Everything had gone off well. But no sooner had they reached the station than they held a meeting, taking advantage of the fact that somebody had forgotten to provide hot water for tea and enough places in the railroad cars for them.

Speakers uninvited by the command had turned up. The battalion, which had started off with the shortage of hot water, unexpectedly came to the conclusion that "we've had enough of fighting, at home things are going to rack and ruin, the landowners' estates haven't been divided up, and we don't want to go to the front."

Bonfires had been lit. The smell of resin from split boards, of strong tobacco, and of the dried fish piles up on the nearby wharves mingled over the square with a fresh breeze from the Volga.

I strode excited and happy past the bonfires, the rifles, the agitated soldiers, the yelling orators, and the angry and confused officers, and

plunged into the murky, unfamiliar streets leading from the station.

I stopped the first passer-by and asked him the way to Sormovo.

"My dear boy," he replied in surprise. "You can't walk to Sormovo from here. You've got to take a boat. Just pay your fifty kopeks and get on, only there aren't any boats leaving till morning."

I wandered about a little while longer, until I came to a pile of empty crates near a fence. I climbed into one of them and decided to spend the night there. Soon I fell asleep.

I was aroused by a song. The longshoremen were at work, evidently lifting something heavy. A cracked but pleasant tenor had struck up:

*He-a-ve! Pull her all together!*

The others joined in with harsh, cracked voices:

*H-o-o! Lift her like a feather!*

Something moved, clanged and scraped.

*He-a-ve! Now we're just beginning!*

*H-o-o! The snobs are slow at thinning!*

I peered out. The longshoremen swarmed like ants around a huge rusty winch they were drag-

ging along rails to a platform. The tenor once more sang out from the thick of the crowd:

*He-a-ve! Nicholas got the gate!*  
*H-o-o! The help has not been great!*

The winch clanged again.

*Sashka soon will take a trouncing,*  
*When we send the fellow bouncing!*

The winch clanged onto the groaning platform. The song broke off, and in its stead there rose a clamour of shouts, curses and exclamations.

"Some song!" I thought. "Who's Sashka? Oh, I know — that's Kerensky they're singing about. Back in Arzamas they'd bury a man alive for singing a song like that, but here a militiaman turns his back and pretends he doesn't hear a thing."

A small, dirty steamer was moored to the wharf. I didn't have fifty kopeks for a ticket, and I could see a red-headed ticket collector and a sailor with a rifle standing by the narrow gangplank.

I bit my nails and looked long and hard at the narrow strip of oily water gurgling between the wharf and the side of the boat. Watermelon rinds, pieces of wood, scraps of newspaper and sundry other rubbish floated in the water.

"Should I try my luck with the ticket collector?" I thought. "I can make up a story. Tell him I'm an orphan going to visit my sick grandmother and ask him to help me get there."

The dark, oily surface of the water reflected my sunburnt face, my large, close-cropped head and my nice student's uniform with its shiny brass buttons.

I heaved a sigh and decided I'd have to drop the orphan story. With a face like mine who'd believe I was an orphan?

I had read in books about fellows who got jobs on boats as cabin boys when they had no money for a ticket. But this was no good in my case: all I wanted was to get to the other side of the river.

"Hey, move over!" a roguish young voice sang out behind me. I turned around and saw a small pock-marked boy.

He dropped a batch of leaflets on a box and quickly snatched a fat, soiled butt from under my feet.

"Jeez, what a nitwit!" he said scornfully. "Look what you missed!"

I said I didn't give a hang about the butt because I didn't smoke. Then I asked him what he was doing there.

"Me?" The boy skilfully spat square onto a

log floating past. "I'm distributing leaflets for our committee."

"What committee?"

"The workers', naturally. You can help me hand 'em out if you like."

"I would," I replied, "only I've got to get across to Sormovo on that boat, and the trouble is I haven't got a ticket."

"What d'you want to go there for?"

"To see my uncle. He works at the plant over there."

"You don't say!" the boy exclaimed. "He's going to his uncle's but he hasn't got the fare!"

"I haven't got it because I didn't think I was coming," I blurted out frankly. "I made up my mind all of a sudden and ran away from home."

"Ra-a-n away?" The boy eyed me unbelievably. Then he sniffed and added with sympathy, "Won't your father give you a licking, though, when you get back!"

"I'm not going back. And what's more, I haven't got a father. My father was killed when we still had the tsar. He was a Bolshevik."

"Mine's a Bolshevik too," the boy said rapidly. "Only he's alive. My father's the best-known man in Sormovo, kid! You just ask anybody, 'Where does Pavel Korchagin live?' and he'll say, 'Oh, you'll find him at the committee head-

quarters — out at Varikha — at the Ter-Akopov plant.' That's who my father is!"

The boy flicked away his butt, hitched up his trousers and dived into the crowd, leaving the leaflets on the box.

I picked one up. It said that Kerensky was a traitor, that he was preparing to make an agreement with counter-revolutionary General Kornilov. The leaflet openly called upon the people to overthrow the Provisional Government and proclaim Soviet power.

The trenchant tone of the leaflet surprised me even more than the flippant song of the longshoremen. Suddenly the boy emerged from behind some herring barrels. He was panting.

"Nothing doing, brother!" he said.

"Nothing doing about what?" I asked, puzzled.

"Nothing doing about the fifty kopeks. I spotted Simon Kotylkin — he's one of our guys — but he didn't have a kopek."

"What do you want the money for?"

"For you, you nut!" He looked at me in surprise. "You could've got your ticket, and I would've given him back the money in Sormovo. I come from there too."

He hopped around a bit, then disappeared again and returned just as quickly.

"You know what? We'll get along without it. Take these leaflets and hop onto the boat. You see that sailor with the gun over there? That's Pashka Surkov. When you come to the gangplank tell him you're from committee headquarters with leaflets, and walk right past the ticket collector. Just walk right up. The sailor's one of our men; he'll stick up for you if anything goes wrong."

"But what about you?"

"I can get through anywhere, brother. Everybody knows me around here."

\*

The old tub, her deck littered with nut shells and apple cores, had left shore long ago, but my new friend was nowhere to be seen.

I settled down on a pile of rusty anchor chains, and drinking in the cool air with its smell of apples, oil and fish, gave my undivided attention to the passengers. Next to me sat a deacon or a monk — I couldn't tell which — trying to make himself as small as possible. He kept glancing around furtively as he nibbled on a slice of watermelon and carefully spat the seeds out into his hand.

Besides the monk and a few peasant women with empty milk cans, there were two officers

and four militiamen standing a little way off from the others, near a civilian with a red armband.

The rest of the passengers were workers. They stood in small knots, conversing, arguing, bickering, laughing, reading newspapers aloud. They all seemed to know one another, for many of them unceremoniously joined in the conversation of others; remarks and jokes flew from one side of the boat to the other.

The outlines of Sormovo grew more distinct. It was a calm morning. The smoke from the factories billowed into little clouds that spread like black branches over the stone trunks of the gigantic chimneys.

"Hi, there!" the pock-marked boy called from behind me.

I was glad to see him because I did not know what to do with the leaflets.

He sat down next to me on a coiled rope and gave me an apple from his pocket.

"Here. The longshoremen gave me a whole capful because whenever a new leaflet or paper comes out I always get it to them first. Yesterday they gave me a string of smoked fish. It doesn't cost them anything! All they've got to do is reach into a sack. I ate three fish myself and took two home: one for Anka and one for

Manka. My sisters," he explained, and added condescendingly: "Fool girls. All they care about is eating."

The hum of conversation on deck suddenly ceased as the civilian with the red arm-band, accompanied by the militiamen, unexpectedly began to examine the passengers' identification papers. The workers produced their crumpled, soiled papers in silence, hurling sarcastic remarks in the wake of the civilian.

"Who they lookin' for?"

"The devil knows."

"They ought to come over to Sormovo and have a look around there!"

The militiamen followed the civilian reluctantly; they obviously felt uneasy under the concentrated stare of so many hostile eyes.

The civilian paid no attention to the general constrained resentment, but merely lifted his eyebrows arrogantly and approached the monk. The latter tried to make himself still smaller, and raising his hands in a gesture of sorrow, pointed to the cup hanging at his belt with the sign: "Merciful Christians, help rebuild the churches destroyed by the Germans."

The civilian curved his lips in a sneer, turned away from the monk and jerked the shoulder of my neighbour — the boy — rather roughly.

"Your papers."

"I'll get them when I grow up," the boy snarled. He tried to wrench loose from the man's firm grip but lost his balance and dropped his batch of leaflets.

The civilian picked one of them up, scanned it rapidly and said in a low, hard voice:

"You're too small to have papers, but you're big enough to carry proclamations around, is that the idea? Hey you — grab him!"

But the civilian was not the only one to see the leaflets. A gust of wind swept up a dozen of the white sheets and sent them flying all over the crowded deck. Before the slow-moving militiamen managed to lay their hands on the pock-marked boy the entire deck had begun to buzz and hum.

"Why don't you go after Kornilov instead?"

"You let a monk get away without papers, but when it comes to a kid you're right on the spot!"

"This isn't any old town — this is Sor-movo!"

"Hey, that's enough! Keep quiet!" the civilian barked, glancing anxiously at the militiamen.

"Hay is for horses, you gendarme in plain clothes! Did you see how he snatched up the leaflets!"

A piece of cucumber flew past the civilian's cap.

Hemmed in by the excited passengers, the militiamen glanced about apprehensively.

"Stand back, stand back, quiet there!" they ordered nervously.

Suddenly the whistle blew and a man on the captain's bridge shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Back away from the portside — get off the portside or you'll upset the boat!"

The crowd scrambled up the sloping deck to the other side. Taking advantage of the commotion, the civilian swore at the militiamen and slipped over to the two pale, agitated officers who stood near the ladder leading to the captain's bridge.

The boat docked, and the workers hurried down the gangplank. The pock-marked boy turned up at my side again. His eyes were flashing, and he clutched the crumpled batch of retrieved leaflets.

"Come over to my place!" he cried. "To Varikha! Ask for Vaska Korchagin — anybody'll show you the way!"

*Chapter Six*

I gazed with interest and surprise at the little houses grey with soot, and at the brick walls of the factories, behind whose black windows bright tongues of flames flashed and machines rumbled.

It was the dinner hour. A locomotive pulling flatcars loaded with wheels chugged past me straight across the street, scaring the stray dogs with its blasts of steam. Whistles blew in every imaginable key. Crowds of sweaty, tired workers poured out of the factory gates.

A flock of barefoot urchins bore down on them with steaming dinner pails that gave off an odour of onions and sour cabbage.

I made my way down the crooked alleys until I finally reached the street where Jackdaw lived.

I tapped on the window of a small wooden house. A skinny grey-haired old woman disattached herself from her washtub, poked her steam-flushed face out of the window and angrily asked what I wanted.

I told her.

"No such man living here," she replied. "He used to live here, but he left a long time ago." She slammed the window shut. This news staggered me. I turned the corner and stopped near a pile of cobblestones. Now I felt terribly tired, hungry and sleepy.

Besides Jackdaw, the only person I knew in Sormovo was Uncle Nikolai, my mother's brother. But I didn't know where he lived, or where he worked, or how he would receive me.

I tramped the streets for several hours, doggedly peering into the faces of the workers walking past me. Naturally, I did not come across my uncle.

At the end of my tether and feeling totally forsaken and unwanted, I sank onto a mangy little grass plot littered with fish scales and lumps of lime that had gone yellow with the rain. I closed my eyes and began to reflect upon my sad fate.

The longer I thought, the more bitter I felt and the more senseless seemed my flight from home.

But even now I dismissed the thought of returning to Arzamas. I felt I would be even more alone there. Everybody would laugh at me, as they had at Tupikov. My mother would suffer quietly, and who knows but what she might even go to the principal and beg him to take me back into school.

I was made of stubborn stuff. Back in Arzamas I had seen real, pulsating life sweep past on the trains in a shower of sparks and a blaze of lights. It had seemed to me that if only I could jump onto the steps of a railroad coach, just get a

toehold and clutch the handrails tight, nothing would ever be able to make me go back again.

An old man came up to a fence nearby. He was carrying a bucket, a brush and a roll of posters. He smeared a thick layer of paste on the boards, stuck a poster on, and smoothed out the wrinkles. Then he set his bucket on the ground, glanced around and called to me.

"Pull the matches out of my pocket, there's a good boy. My hands are covered with paste. Thanks," he said, when I had struck a match and brought it to his pipe.

He took a few puffs and picked up his dirty bucket with a grunt.

"Ekh, the old bones are creaking!" he said with gruff humour. "There was a time when I could swing a 36-pound hammer, and now my arm goes numb when I carry a pail."

"Let me carry it, Grandpa," I offered eagerly. "My arm won't go numb. Look how strong I am!"

I grabbed at the bucket handle, afraid that he would refuse.

"Okay, you lug it," the old man agreed. "You carry it a bit and we'll get the job done quicker that way."

The old man and I did the fences on quite a few blocks.

Every time we stopped, passers-by would cluster around us to see what we were pasting up.

I became so engrossed in my work that I completely forgot about my plight. There were all kinds of posters. One said: "Eight hours for work, eight for sleep, and eight for rest." To tell the truth, I found this one pretty dull. The one I really liked was a big blue poster with dark red letters saying: "Only gun in hand can the proletariat attain the radiant kingdom of Socialism."

The mysterious beauty of this "radiant kingdom" that the proletariat had to attain beckoned to me even more than distant exotic lands do to a schoolboy carried away by Mayne Reid. Those countries, no matter how distant, have already been explored, divided up and entered on dull school maps. But this "radiant kingdom" of which the poster spoke had not yet been won by anybody. No human foot had yet trod its wonderful domains.

"You must be tired already, kid," the old man said, coming to a standstill. "Run along home, I can manage by myself now."

"No, no, I'm not tired," I said quickly, distressed at the thought that I would soon be all alone again.

"Well, all right," agreed the old man. "Only see they don't give it to you at home,"

"I haven't got a home," I burst out. "I mean I've got a home, only it's far away."

And feeling the need to share my sorrows with someone, I told the old man my story.

He listened attentively and then looked at my flushed face with searching and slightly mocking eyes.

"We'll have to look into this matter," he said calmly. "Sormovo's big enough, no doubt, but a man's not a needle. You say your uncle's a fitter?"

"He was a fitter," I replied, brightening. "His name's Nikolai. Nikolai Yegorovich Dubryakov. I suppose he's a party member, like my father was. Maybe they know him at the committee headquarters."

"No, never heard of him. Well, never mind. We'll finish putting up these posters and go along to my place. I'll ask some of our men, maybe they'll know."

The old man frowned for some reason or other and walked on, puffing at his pipe in silence.

"You say your father was killed?" he asked all of a sudden.

"Yes."

The old man wiped his hands on his patched, grease-stained trousers and slapped me on the back.

"Come along to my house," he said. "We'll have some potatoes with onions, and some tea. I bet you're pretty hungry, eh?"

The bucket suddenly seemed very light. And I no longer doubted that my flight from Arzamas was both necessary and sensible.

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My uncle was found at last. He turned out to be not a fitter but a foreman in a boiler shop.

He told me briefly not to make an ass of myself and to go back home at once.

"There's nothing for you to do here. A man'll grow up to be somebody only if he knows his place," he said morosely on the first day of my visit, while we were having dinner. He wiped his greasy red moustache with a towel and continued: "Take me, for instance. I know my place. First I was an apprentice, then a fitter, and now I've become a foreman. Now, why did I and not the next fellow become a foreman? Because he idles and gabs all the time. He doesn't like to work, you see. He envies the engineer — wants to have everything handed to him on a platter. Now take yourself. Why didn't you stick it out in school? You could have studied nice and quiet to be a doctor or a technician. But no — you had to be original. If you ask me, plain laziness is at the bottom of it. My opinion is that a man ought to move ahead in whatever field he's picked. Just work his way up slow but sure — and one day he'll find himself a made man."

"What do you mean, Uncle Nikolai?" I said softly. I was hurt. "What about Father? He was a private. Does that mean he should have gone to an army school and become an officer? Maybe even a captain? According to you he should have become a captain instead of doing all he did, and going underground?"

Uncle frowned.

"I don't want to say anything bad about your father, but I can't see any sense in what he did. He was a restless sort of fellow, with crazy ideas. He nearly got me in a fix too. They'd just promised to promote me to foreman, and they told me, 'So that's the kind of relative you had visiting you!' I had the time of my life hushing it up."

Uncle scooped a juicy bone out of the bowl, smeared it generously with mustard, salted it and, digging his strong yellow teeth into the meat, shook his head glumly.

When his wife, a tall, good-looking woman, brought in an ornamented earthen mug of home-made *kvass* after dinner, he told her:

"I'll take a short nap — wake me up in an hour. I've got to drop a line to my sister Varvara. Boris'll take it along when he goes."

"When is he going?"

"When? Tomorrow's as good as any day."

Someone tapped on the window.

"Uncle Nikolai," a voice called from the street. "Are you coming to the meeting?"

"To what?"

"To the meeting! The square's full of people."

"To hell with it." Uncle waved his hand in annoyance. "I can do without it."

I waited until he lay down to rest and then slipped out of doors.

"Looks like my uncle's a skinflint!" I thought. "All puffed up because he's a foreman! And I thought he was a party member. Will I have to go back to Arzamas after all?"

About two or three thousand men had gathered around a board platform to listen to the speakers. I glimpsed the familiar pock-marked face of Vaska Korchagin in the crowd and hailed him.

He did not hear me. I ran after him, and twice I caught sight of his curly head but then he disappeared altogether. Meanwhile I had come quite close to the platform.

It was almost impossible to get any nearer. I stopped to listen. The speakers changed in rapid succession. I remember one of them — a nondescript, poorly-dressed fellow, like the hundreds of workers you pass on the streets of Sormovo and never notice.. He clumsily pulled off his battered cap, cleared his throat and, straining

his cracked voice, began in what seemed to me an angry tone:

"All you comrades from the locomotive and car shops, and some of you from the oil depot, know that I did eight years of hard labour as a political prisoner. Well, I'd just come back and got a breath of fresh air when — bango — they lock me up in jail again for two months! Who locked me up? Not the police of the old regime but the hangers-on of the new one. I didn't mind sitting it out when the tsar put me there. We always had to sit it out in jail because of the tsar. But it hurt like hell to be locked up by those hangers-on! The generals and officers have pinned on red ribbons just like friends of the revolution. But the moment one of us raises his voice they stick him in the cooler. We're being chased and hunted down. I'm not bellyaching about myself for being locked up for two extra months, comrades, but about us workers and the rotten deal we're getting."

He coughed and tried to catch his breath. Just as he opened his mouth to speak again he was taken with another fit of coughing. His body jerked painfully as he clutched at the railing of the platform. Finally he shook his head and climbed down.

"Finished him off, they did!" somebody said in a loud, indignant voice.

The first snowflakes of the year came floating down from the overcast sky. A dry, cold wind was stripping the trees of their last blackened leaves. My feet were getting cold. I wanted to get out of the crowd and try to warm up by running around. I elbowed my way through, not paying any attention to the speakers on the platform. Suddenly a familiar, high-pitched voice made me swing around. The snow blinded me. Somebody pushed me and then somebody else stepped on my foot. Raising myself up on my toes, I gasped with joy to see the familiar bearded face of Jackdaw up there on the platform.

I made my way to the platform through the dense, unyielding crowd. I was afraid that after finishing his speech Jackdaw would be swallowed up by the seething mass and wouldn't hear me call, and I would lose him again. To attract his attention I waved my cap in the air and then I waved my hand. But he did not see me.

When I saw Jackdaw lift up his hand and raise his voice to wind up his speech, I yelled as loud as I could:

"Semyon Ivanovich! Semyon Ivano-vi-i-ich!"

People all around hissed at me. Somebody punched me in the back. But I yelled still louder.

"Semyon Ivanovi-i-ich!"

Jackdaw looked puzzled and spread out his arms awkwardly. Then he bungled the end of his speech and ran down the steps.

One of my infuriated neighbours grabbed me by the arm and pulled me aside.

But I paid no attention to the curses and the punches. I was laughing like a madman.

"Look here, what are you making such a racket about?" the worker who had pulled me aside snapped as he shook me.

"I'm not making a racket," I said, still smiling blissfully and jumping up and down to warm my numbed feet. "I've found Jackdaw — Semyon Ivanovich...."

The angry man must have seen something in my face to make him smile, for smile he did. He asked me in a kinder tone:

"What kind of jackdaw?"

"No kind. I meant Semyon Ivanovich! Here he comes."

Jackdaw broke through the crowd and seized me by the shoulder.

"How did you get here?"

The crowd was milling about the square in excitement. A hubbub of consternation hung in the air. Everywhere I saw alarmed, angry and confused faces.

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said without answering his question. "What's the noise about?"

"A telegram came in," he replied rapidly. "Kerensky has betrayed the revolution! Kornilov is advancing on Petrograd."

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The short autumn days flew past like the strange, glittering stations one sees from an express train speeding through the night. A job was found for me at once. Now, drawn into the maelstrom of fast-moving events, I felt useful.

One turbulent day Jackdaw told me in a worried voice:

"Boris, run over to the committee headquarters and tell them that an agitator was wanted down at Varikha at once and that I went there. Find Yershov and tell him to go to the printshop instead of me. If you don't find Yershov, then.... Give me a pencil. Here, take this note to the printshop yourself. And don't go into the office but hand it to the stoneman. Remember him? He was at Korchagin's, a dark fellow with glasses. When you're finished, come down to Varikha. And if there are any fresh leaflets at headquarters, bring them along. Tell Pavel I asked for them. Here, wait a moment!" he called after me anxiously. "It's cold outside. You'd better put on my old cape."

But I had already sped off like a spirited

cavalry horse, hurdling over the puddles and ruts in the muddy road.

I bumped into Korchagin in the doorway of the party headquarters, which was as noisy as a railroad station at train time. If I had collided with a man of slighter build I would undoubtedly have bowled him over. But bumping into Korchagin was like hitting a telegraph pole.

"Oof! What's happened?" he rapped out. "Fall off a belfry?"

"No," I panted, rubbing my head in confusion. "Semyon Ivanovich asked me to tell you he's down at Varikha."

"I know, they rang me up already."

"And he asked for leaflets."

"We've already sent them. What else?"

"Yershov's wanted. He has to go to the printshop. Here's a note."

"What's this about the printshop? Let's see the note," interjected an armed worker wearing an army greatcoat over an old jacket.

"Semyon's seeing things," he said to Korchagin after scanning the note. "What's he worried about the printshop for? I sent a few guards down there at noon."

A steady flow of people kept coming up the porch of the party headquarters. Despite the cold the door was wide open; inside, men in greatcoats, faded leather jackets and blouses could be seen

milling around. In the passage two men were ripping off the lid of a crate in which new, well-oiled army rifles lay in nests of straw. Several empty crates were already lying in the mud outside, by the porch.

Korchagin appeared again. He was speaking rapidly on the go to three armed workers:

"Go as fast as you can. Remain there and don't let anybody in without a pass from headquarters. Send someone over to let us know how things are coming along."

"Who should we send?"

"Oh, any one our men, the first fellow you come across."

"Let me be the first fellow you come across!" I shouted, feeling tremendously excited. I was eager to be in the thick of events.

"All right, take him along. He's a fast runner."

Just then I noticed that almost every man leaving the place went up to the crate and picked out a rifle.

"Comrade Korchagin," I said. "Everybody's taking a rifle. Can I take one too?"

"What do you want?" he said with a frown, interrupting his conversation with a hefty, tattooed sailor.

"A rifle! I'm no worse than the others."

Somebody called Korchagin from the next room and he hurried off, waving his hand at me.

Perhaps his gesture meant that he did not wish to be disturbed, but I took it as a sign of permission. I picked out a rifle and, hugging it tight, followed the two worker guards down the steps of the porch.

As I crossed the yard I heard someone pass on a fresh piece of news: Soviet power had been proclaimed in Petrograd, Kerensky had fled. In Moscow the insurgents were fighting the Cadets.

# THE FRONT

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## *Chapter One*

**H**ALF a year passed.

One sunny day in April I mailed a letter to my mother from the railroad station.

"Mama!

"Goodbye, goodbye! I am off to join the group of the renowned Comrade Sivers, who is fighting the White troops of Kornilov and Kaledin. Three of us are going. We were given papers by the Sormovo workers' militia, of which both Belka and I are members. They didn't want to give me papers for a long time — said I was too young. I begged Jackdaw to help me and he finally fixed it up. He'd come himself, only he's too weak and has a bad cough. I'm dizzy with joy. Everything that's happened up to now is nothing. Real life is just beginning, and that's why I feel so great...."

On the third day out, during a six-hour stop at a small station, we heard that things were not so quiet in the neighbourhood; small gangs of bandits had appeared, and there had been skirmishes between kulaks and food detachments. It was late at night by the time a locomotive was

hitched to our train. My comrades and I lay side by side on the upper bunks of a boxcar. When I heard the measured click of the wheels and the squeaking of the car in motion, I wrapped my overcoat around me more snugly and got ready to fall asleep.

Snoring, coughing and sounds of scratching filled the darkness. The passengers who had managed to squeeze themselves onto bunks were fast asleep. The rest, lying cramped and huddled on bundles on the floor, were pushing, grumbling and cursing.

"Quit that pushing," a bass voice drawled. "What are you pushing me off my bundle for? Better look out, or I'll give you such a push you'll never want to push anybody again."

"Look at that devil, now!" a woman's voice shrilled angrily. "Keep your big boots off my face, you lout! Pig!"

Someone struck a match, and its flickering light showed a heaving mass of boots, bundles, baskets, caps, arms and legs. When the match went out the darkness seemed even thicker. A man in the corner was telling the long, tedious story of his dreary life in a tired, rasping monotone. A listener puffed understandingly at his cigarette. As it jolted over the tracks the car twitched like a horse beset by flies.

I awoke when one of my companions pulled

at my arm. I raised my head and a refreshing stream of cold air from the window poured over my sleep-lined face. The train was moving slowly, evidently labouring uphill. A roseate glow suffused the entire horizon. Above the glow the twinkling little stars and the pale moon were fading away as though consumed by a fire.

"The land's revolting," someone spoke up in a calm and confident voice from a dark corner.

"It wants the whip, that's why it's revolting," a low voice grumbled from the opposite corner.

The conversation was cut short by a terrific crash. The car swayed and hit something, and I flew off the bunk onto the heads of the people on the floor. Chaos followed, and the black mass in the car tumbled out the open door, shouting and screaming.

There had been an accident.

I fell awkwardly into a ditch by the roadbed and barely managed to get up in time to avoid being crushed by people jumping out of the cars. Two shots rang out. A man at my side spread out his trembling fingers and said rapidly:

"It's nothing — nothing at all.... Only don't run; they'll open fire if you do. These aren't Whites, they're local Cossacks. They'll only rob the passengers and then let them go."

Two men with rifles ran up to our car yelling:

"Ge-e-t back in! G-e-et in! Where do you think you're going?"

The passengers scrambled into the cars. Somebody pushed me and I fell back into the wet ditch. Flattening myself out, I crawled quickly, like a lizard, toward the tail of the train. My car had been the last but one, and in a minute I found myself almost under the train's dim tail lantern. A peasant stood there with a rifle. I wanted to turn back but just then the peasant, most likely noticing someone on the other side of the road-bed, ran off in that direction. A leap — and I rolled down the slippery clay slope of a gully. When I reached the bottom I got up and dragged my heavy, mud-caked boots in the direction of a woods.

Life was astir in the budding forest. Somewhere in the distance cocks were crowing lustily. Frogs out for a sun bath croaked in a nearby clearing. Here and there patches of grey snow lay in the shade; but wherever the sun shone through, last year's coarse grass was dry. I rested and scraped the clay off my boots with a piece of birch bark. Then I pulled up a bunch of grass, dipped it in a pool and washed my mud-stained face.

I was unfamiliar with the locality. How was I to get to the nearest station? I could hear dogs barking — there must be a village nearby. Should

I go and ask? And what if I walked into a kulak trap? They would want to know who I was, where I was from, and why. There were my papers to think about, and my Mauser. Well, I could hide the papers in my boot, but what about the Mauser? Throw it away?

I took it out and turned it over in my hand. My heart contracted. The little Mauser nestled so comfortably in my palm and its flat barrel of burnished steel shone so tranquilly that I felt ashamed of my thought. I stroked it and put it back in a little secret pocket in the lining of my jacket.

The morning was bright and noisy. Sitting there on a tree stump in the middle of a yellow clearing, I found it hard to believe that danger lurked not far away.

"Ping, ping — tarrah!" came a familiar whistle overhead. A large sky-blue tomtit alighted on a branch just above me and squinted at me with curiosity.

"Ping, ping — tarrah — hello there!" it whistled, hopping from one foot to the other.

I could not help smiling, remembering Timka Shtukín. He used to call the tomtit a fooltail. Was it so long ago? — the tomtits, the cemetery, our games. . . . And now look at how things had turned out! I frowned. What was I to do, after all?

Somewhere quite near I heard the crack of a whip and the lowing of cows. "That's a herd," I said to myself. "I'll go and ask the herder the way to the station. He can't hurt me. I'll ask him and then run for it."

A small herd of cows moved slowly along the fringe of the forest, nibbling lazily and reluctantly at last year's grass. An old herder with a long, heavy staff plodded after them. I walked up to him from the side with the calm, unhurried gait of a person out for a stroll.

"Hello, Grandpa!"

"Hello," he replied hesitantly. He stopped and looked me over.

"Is it far to the railroad station from here?"

"The station? Which station are you looking for?"

I faltered. I did not even know what station I wanted.

"Is it Alexeyevka?" the old man prompted.

"That's right," I nodded. "That's the one. You see, I've sort of lost my way."

"Where are you coming from?"

I faltered again.

"From over there," I said as calmly as I could, and waved my hand uncertainly in the direction of a little village visible on the horizon.

"Hm.... From there you say? Coming from Demenevo, I suppose?"

"That's right. Straight from Demenevo."

At this juncture I heard footsteps and the growl of a dog. Turning around, I saw a husky fellow coming toward us, the herder's assistant, most likely.

What's up, Uncle 'Lexander?" he asked, munching on a piece of rye bread.

"This fellow here wants to know how to get to Alexeyevka Station. Says he's on his way from Demenevo."

The boy dropped the hand holding the bread and stared at me with bulging eyes.

"What's that?" he said.

"Can't make him out. Demenevo is right next to Alexeyevka Station. And how did he ever get here?"

"We ought to take him over to the village," the boy said coolly. "Let them figure it out at the outpost. He's probably got more lies to tell."

I knew nothing at all about the outpost that would "figure it out," or how it would figure it out; nonetheless, I had no desire to go to the village, if only for the reason that the villages around here were rich and restless. So without waiting for any further developments I sprang away from the old man and plunged into the forest.

The boy soon fell behind. But the dratted dog managed to bite my leg twice. Its sharp teeth

pierced the thick tops of my boots and sank into my flesh. But I felt no pain then, just as I did not feel the branches slapping my face with their gnarled, outstretched fingers, or the little mounds and the stumps against which I barked my shins.

I wandered about the forest until evening. From the many fresh tree stumps I could see it was not wild.

The deeper I tried to get into the forest, the sparser the trees became and the more numerous were the clearings on which I saw hoofprints and horse dung. Night fell. I was tired, hungry and badly scratched up. It was time to think of a place to sleep. I selected a dry, sheltered spot under a bush and lay down with a log under my head. Fatigue began to tell. My cheeks burned and the dog bites ached.

"I'll go to sleep," I decided. "It's night and nobody'll find me here. I'm tired. I'll sleep and in the morning I'll think of something."

As I dozed off I recalled Arzamas, the pond, our war on the rafts, my bed with the warm old quilt. I remembered how Fedka and I had caught some pigeons and fried them on Fedka's frying pan and then eaten them up in secret. The pigeons had tasted so good....

The wind began to whistle in the treetops. The forest seemed empty and eerie. Old Arzamas

appeared to me at that moment as warm and fragrant as a rich Sunday pie.

As I drew my coat collar over my head I felt an uninvited tear roll down my cheek. But I did not cry.

In the night, when the cold became unbearable, I jumped up and ran around the clearing, tried to climb a birch tree and even danced. When I had warmed up I lay down, only to spring up later on, when the forest mist had stolen away my warmth.

## *Chapter Two*

The sun rose again and it grew warm; the birds began to twitter and gay flocks of spring cranes cried their greetings from the skies. I smiled and felt glad that the night had passed. I was no longer beset by black thoughts, except, perhaps, for one: where to get something to eat.

I had not gone two hundred paces when I heard the quacking of geese and the grunting of pigs. I spotted the green roof of a lone cottage through the leaves.

"I'll creep up," I decided, "and see how the land lies. Then I'll ask directions and for something to eat."

I hid behind an elder bush. It was quiet and there was no one in sight. A thin wisp of smoke curled up from the cottage chimney. A flock of geese waddled toward me.

Then I heard the faint snapping of a twig. My legs stiffened at once and I turned my head. But my fright immediately gave way to surprise. A young fellow was standing behind a bush not more than ten paces away, staring at me. He was not the owner of the cottage, because he was also hiding and watching the yard. We eyed each other warily, like two wild beasts who had met while hunting down the same prey. Then, as though by silent agreement, we both turned back into the thicket and approached each other.

He was the same height as I. I placed his age at about seventeen. His black woollen jacket fitted his strong, muscular frame like a glove, but it had no buttons — it looked as though they had not just fallen off but had been cut off. A few dry burrs clung to the sturdy trousers that he wore inside his muddy chrome leather boots.

His pale, lined face and the dark hollows under his eyes gave the impression that he too had spent the night in the woods.

"Well, what's the layout?" he asked in a low voice, jerking his head toward the cottage. "Going in?"

"Yes," I replied. "You too?"

"They won't give you anything," he said. "I've already had a look: there's three hefty fellows in there. You may put your foot in it."

"But what else can I do? I've got to eat!"

"Naturally," he agreed. "Only not by begging. Nowadays they don't give anything to beggars. Who are you?" he asked, and without waiting for an answer, added, "Okay. We'll manage ourselves. Singlehanded it's hard, but the two of us will do the trick. The geese wandering around here in the thicket are nice and fat."

"But that's stealing!"

He looked at me as though he found my remark ludicrous, and added softly:

"Nowadays there's no stealing. Nowadays everything's ours. You go beyond the clearing and steer a goose my way while I hide behind a bush."

I picked out a fat grey goose which had fallen behind its fellows and barred its way. The goose turned and waddled off unhurriedly, stopping now and then to peck at the ground. I followed step by step, propelling it toward our ambush. It had almost reached the bush when it suddenly stopped, twisted its neck around and looked in my direction as though wondering why I was pursuing it so insistently. After standing there a while, it set off resolutely in the opposite direc-

tion, but just then the boy dived out from behind the bush like a cat pouncing upon a sparrow, and got a tight grip on the goose's neck. The bird barely managed to squeak. The alarmed flock raised a fearful squawking, and the boy dashed into the woods with the fluttering goose. I followed at his heels.

The goose flapped its wings and twitched its legs a long time; it fell still with exhaustion only after we had come to a remote, secluded ravine. The boy threw it to the ground and reached for his tobacco.

"Okay," he said, breathing hard. "We can stop here."

My new comrade pulled out a penknife and began to pluck the goose, glancing up at me from time to time.

I gathered some twigs and piled them up.

"Got any matches?" I asked.

"Here." He held out a box of matches gingerly in his bloodstained fingers. "Don't use too many."

I managed to get a good look at him then. The layer of dust could not hide the smooth whiteness of his face. When he spoke the right corner of his mouth trembled slightly and his left eye narrowed. He was about two years older than I and apparently stronger. While the stolen goose was roasting on a spit, giving off an agoniz-

ingly appetizing odour, we sprawled on the grass.

"Want to smoke?" the boy asked.

"No, I don't smoke."

"Spend the night in the forest? Damn cold," he added, before I had time to reply. "How did you get here? Come from over there too?" He waved his hand in the direction of the railroad.

"Yes. I ran from the train when it was stopped."

"To inspect papers?"

"No," I answered in surprise. "They didn't care about papers — those were bandits."

"Oh, I see. . . ." He puffed at his cigarette.

"Where are you heading for?" he asked suddenly after a long silence.

"The Don," I began, and faltered.

"The Do-o-n?" he asked, rising up a bit. "Did you say you were going to the Don?"

A swift, suspicious smile flickered over his thin, cracked lips, and his narrow eyes opened wide. Then the light in them faded at once and he assumed an indifferent expression.

"Got relatives down there, huh?" he inquired lazily.

"Yes. . . ." I replied cautiously, feeling that he was trying to pump me while keeping quiet about himself.

He fell silent again and turned the goose over. Drops of fat sizzled into the flames.

"I'm going down that way too," he said calmly. "Only not to my relatives but to join the Siverson detachment."

He told me that he had been studying in Penza and had come to visit his uncle, a schoolteacher in a nearby district, but that the kulaks had risen and he had barely managed to get away.

As we devoured the goose, which had become charred and had a smoky flavour, we had a long and friendly talk.

I was happy to have found a comrade. My spirits soared and I felt that together we would easily extricate ourselves from the trap into which we had fallen.

"Let's sleep while the sun's still up," my new comrade proposed. "We can snatch a bit of sleep now, but at night we won't get a wink for the cold."

We stretched out on the grass and I soon dozed off. I would have fallen asleep if not for an ant that had crawled up my nose. I sat up and sneezed. My comrade was asleep. The collar of his jacket was unfastened and I saw the letters "C. A. C. C." printed in black on its canvas lining.

"What school is that?" I wondered. My buckle had the letters A. P. S., which stands for Arzamas Polytechnical School. But what was C. A. C. C.?

I tried to figure it out this way and that, but couldn't. "I'll ask him when he wakes up," I decided.

I was very thirsty after eating the fatty goose. There was no water around, so I decided to climb down to the bottom of the ravine where I imagined there would be a creek. I found a creek but could not get to it because of the swampy bank. I went a little farther down, hoping to find a drier spot. A narrow country road ran along the bottom of the ravine beside the creek. The damp, clayey earth bore hoofprints and was littered with fresh horse dung. It looked as if a drove of horses had passed there that morning.

I bent down to pick up my stick, which had slipped from my hand, and saw something shiny in the road. I picked it up and wiped it. It was a tin red star, one of those crude, flimsy stars that in 1918 glittered like tiny red lights on the fur hats of Red Army men and on the shirts of workers and Bolsheviks.

"How did this get here?" I wondered, examining the road. I bent down again, and this time I found an empty cartridge from an army rifle.

Forgetting all about my thirst, I ran back to my comrade. He was not asleep for some reason, but was standing near a bush, glancing about — probably searching for me.

"Reds!" I shouted at the top of my voice as I dashed up to him from the side.

He started violently, ducked his head as though a shot had been fired behind him, and turned a face twisted with fear toward me.

But when he saw I was alone he straightened up and, trying to explain away his fear, said angrily:

"Hell! You shouted right in my ear! I couldn't make out who it was at first."

"Reds," I repeated proudly.

"Where are the Reds? Where've they come from?"

"They passed by this morning. There's hoof-prints and fresh droppings all along the road. I found an empty cartridge too, and this." I held out the star.

My comrade heaved a sigh of relief.

"Why didn't you say so?" Then he added once more, as though justifying himself, "You gave such a yell I didn't know what to think."

"Let's hurry — down the same road. We'll go to the first village — we might find them still resting there. Come on," I hurried him, "why waste time thinking?"

"Okay, let's go," he agreed after what seemed to me like hesitation. "Sure, let's go."

He rubbed his hand over his neck and I glimpsed the letters C. A. C. C. again on the canvas lining of his collar.

"Listen," I said, "what do those letters mean?"

"What letters?" he replied sullenly, hooking up his collar.

"On the lining of your collar."

"Hell knows! This isn't my tunic. I bought it secondhand."

"Oh-h! . . . I'd never say you'd bought it secondhand," I chattered gaily as I strode by his side. "It's a perfect fit — couldn't be better if it had been made to order. My mother once bought me a pair of secondhand trousers, and no matter how much I pulled them up they kept falling down."

The nearer we approached the strange village the more often my comrade halted.

"There's no need to hurry," he said, "it'll be more convenient after sundown. Then nobody'll see us in case the detachment's gone. We'll go around the back of the village, and nobody'll be the wiser. It's pretty risky for a stranger to wander about nowadays, you know."

I agreed it would be safer to do our scouting at nightfall, but I was so impatient to get to our men that I could hardly keep from running. When we had almost reached the village my comrade stopped near a bushy hollow and suggested that

we turn off the road and discuss our immediate plans. In the thicket he said:

"I don't think both of us ought to risk our neck. Let's one of us stay here while the other cuts across the vegetable gardens to the village and finds out what's what. I've got my doubts — it's too quiet and the dogs aren't barking. We might walk into armed kulaks instead of Reds."

"Let's go together then."

"It'll be worse together, you goof!" He gave me a friendly slap on the back. "You stay here. I'll manage somehow by myself. Absolutely no reason for you to stick out your neck. You wait for me here."

"He's a good fellow," I thought when he had gone. "A little queer, but nice all the same. Another guy'd let somebody else take the risk or propose pulling straws, but he volunteered to go himself."

He returned in an hour, sooner than I had expected. He was carrying a big club he had apparently just made.

"You're back soon!" I shouted. "Well, what's the situation?"

"No Reds there!" He shook his head from afar. "And never were! I suppose they turned off onto another road, the one to Suglinki. That's not far from here."

"Are you absolutely sure?" I asked, discouraged. "You mean to say they're really not there?"

"Exactly. An old woman living in the first cottage told me, and a little boy I came across in one of the vegetable patches said the same thing. Looks like we'll have to spend the night here, brother, and take up their trail tomorrow."

I sank to the grass and began to think hard. For the first time I began to doubt the truth of my companion's words. His club puzzled me. It was a heavy thing made of oak and had a big knob at the end. It was obvious he had just made it. It was about an hour's walk to the village. To sneak up to it, make inquiries and return would take no less than two hours at best. But he had been away no more than an hour, and had managed in that time to make an oak club besides. It would have taken no less than a half hour to do that with a penknife. Had he really funked it and sat the time out in the bushes, without learning a thing? But that was incredible! Hadn't he volunteered to do the scouting? Why volunteer then? Besides, he didn't look like a coward. It was a scary job, no doubt about that, but didn't he have to get out of his fix too?

We made a bed of dry leaves, and both of us snuggled in under my coat. Thus we lay for half an hour. Then the dampness from the earth

began to chill my side. "Should have brought more leaves," I thought, and got up.

"What's the matter?" my comrade grumbled in a sleepy voice. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Too damp. You lie here while I bring up some more leaves."

We had already gathered up all the leaves around us, so I went into the bushes nearer the road. The moon was just rising, and it was too dark to see very well. I came across more branches and twigs than leaves. Just then I heard a soft sound coming from the direction of the road. Somebody was either riding or walking along it. I threw down my armful of leaves and groped my way to the road, trying not to step on twigs.

A peasant cart was rolling slowly, almost noiselessly, over the damp, soft earth. Two men were speaking in undertones.

"Well, it's hard to tell," one was saying. "Well, come to think of it, maybe he was right."

"The commander?" the other asked. "Sure, maybe he was. But it isn't as if they were going to be here all the time: they only just came in today, talked a bit, and now they're off again. And later our bosses'll be sure to show up and grab me by the collar. 'You so-and-so,' they'll say. 'So you pointed out the kulaks, did you, you blankety-blank so-and-so!' The Reds should care

Here today and gone tomorrow, but our bosses'll always be here. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"They're getting ready to go off, you say?"

"Sure. One of their soldiers, his name's Fyodor, came around at dusk; told me to have a horse and cart ready for them at twelve."

The voices died away. I stood there not knowing what to think. So the Reds really were in the village! So my companion had fooled me! The Reds were leaving, and then I'd have the time of my life finding them again. I had to hurry. But why had he lied?

My first impulse was to dash off to the village by myself. But then I remembered that I had left my coat in the clearing. "I'll have to go back after all, there's still time. And I ought to tell him about it. He may be a coward but he's on our side just the same."

There was a rustle at my side. My comrade emerged from the bushes. Apparently he had followed me and hidden as I had, and listened to the conversation of the peasants riding past.

"Why did you...?" I began in an angry, reproachful tone.

"Let's go," he said excitedly in place of a reply.

I stepped out toward the road, and he followed me.

Then the club came down on my head and knocked me off my feet. The blow was violent, even though softened by my fur cap. I opened my eyes to see my companion squatting in the moonlight, hastily examining the papers he had pulled out of my trousers pocket.

"So that's what he was after," I realized. "So that's how it is. He isn't a coward at all, he knew the Reds were in the village and purposely kept quiet so as to make me spend the night here and steal my papers. He's not even with the kulaks, because he's afraid of them himself. He's a real White."

I made an attempt to rise and crawl off into the bushes. The boy noticed my movement, stuffed the papers away in his leather pouch and came up to me.

"So you haven't croaked yet?" he said coldly. "You thought you'd found a comrade, you dog! I'm on my way to the Don all right, only to General Krasnov and not to your hound of a Sivers!"

He stood about two paces away from me, swinging his heavy club.

"Thump-thump," went my heart. "Thump-thump," it beat insistently against something hard and firm. I was lying on my side with my right hand on my chest. I felt my fingers creeping cautiously, against my will, inside my jacket, toward the secret pocket where the Mauser lay.

If the stranger had noticed my movement he paid no attention to it, for he knew nothing about the Mauser. I gripped the warm butt and softly released the safety catch. Meanwhile my enemy had stepped back about three paces, to get a better look at me, perhaps, or, more likely, to make room for a good swing at me. Compressing my trembling lips and stretching my hand as though it had gone numb, I brought my Mauser out and pointed it at the boy, who was preparing for a leap.

I saw his face suddenly twist, heard him cry out and throw himself at me, and automatically rather than voluntarily, I pressed the trigger....

He lay two paces away from me, his fists clenched and his arms thrust forward in my direction. The club lay at his side.

"Dead." The thought flashed through my mind. My head grew heavy and hummed like a telegraph pole in the wind. I buried my face in the grass.

I lay there in a daze for a long time. My fever fell. The blood drained away from my face, I suddenly felt cold and my teeth began to chatter. I sat up and looked at the hands stretched out toward me. I was frightened. This was serious! Everything that had taken place before this in my life had actually been a game — even my flight from home, even my military training with those

splendid Sormovo workers, even yesterday's wandering about the forest — but this was serious. It was terrifying for me, a boy of fifteen, to stay in the black forest next to a person I had killed. My head ceased to hum and cold sweat broke out on my brow.

Urged on by terror, I arose, tiptoed over to the dead boy, snatched the pouch with my papers from the grass and backed away toward the bushes without taking my eyes off the corpse. Then I turned and dashed straight through the thicket toward the road and the village, toward people, anywhere — just so as not to be alone any longer.

### *Chapter Three*

As I walked past the first house in the village somebody called out to me.

"Where the hell you going? Hi there, fellow! Stop, you goof!"

A man with a rifle disattached himself from the shady side of the house and approached me.

"Where you running to? Where you from?" the sentry inquired, turning me around to face the moonlight.

"To you," I replied, breathing hard. "You're comrades, aren't you...."

"We're comrades all right," he put in. "But who are you?"

"Me too," I began spasmodically. But feeling that I could not catch my breath and speak at the same time, I handed him the pouch without saying anything more.

"You too?" the sentry inquired a little more gaily, but still with distrust. "Well, come along to the commander if that's the case."

Despite the late hour the village was not asleep. Horses were neighing, gates creaked as they were opened, peasant carts were being brought out.

"Do-ku-kin! Do-ku-kin!" somebody nearby shouted. "Where've you gone to, you devil?"

"What are you yelling for, Vaska?" my guard said sternly as we came up to the man who had shouted.

"I'm looking for Mishka," he said angrily. "He was given sugar rations for both of us, and the boys say he's being sent out ahead to the train with the guards."

"He'll give you your share tomorrow."

"That's what you think! He'll guzzle the whole lot with his tea tomorrow morning. I know his sweet tooth!"

At this juncture the man noticed me. He changed his tone at once and asked with curiosity:

"Who've you caught, Chubuk? Taking him to headquarters? Attaboy, take him along. They'll show him what's what! You skunk!" he suddenly swore at me and made a motion as though he were going to hit me with his rifle butt.

My escort pushed him away, however.

"That's enough," he said angrily. "This here's none of your business. No need to yell at a fellow too soon. There's an idiot for you, Christ almighty, a regular idiot!"

"*Zing-zing! Zick-zack!*" came a metallic clanking at our side. A man in a tall black fur hat wearing spurs, with a long, shiny sword and a wooden Mauser holster at his waist and a riding crop on his wrist, was leading a horse out of a gate.

A bugler strode at his side.

"Reveille," said the man, putting his foot into the stirrup.

"Ta-ta-ra-ta-ta-ta," the bugle blew softly and gently. "Ta-ta-ta-ta-a-a...."

"Shebalov," my escort called out to the man. "Wait a minute! Here's someone to see you."

"What for?" the other asked without taking his foot out of the stirrup. "Who's he?"

"He says he's one of us, on our side, that is — and he's got papers."

"I've no time," the commander replied,

swinging into the saddle. "You know how to read, Chubuk. Take a look at his papers yourself. If he's on our side, then let him off, let him go with God."

"I won't go anywhere," I blurted out, frightened at the prospect of remaining alone again. "I've been wandering about the forest by myself for two whole days now. I've come to you. And I want to remain with you."

"With us?" the man in the black fur hat asked in surprise. "But suppose we have no use for you!"

"Yes, you have," I said stubbornly. "Where'll I go by myself?"

"He's right there. If he's really on our side, then where'll he go by himself?" my escort said in my defence. "It ain't healthy to wander about alone nowadays. Don't play around with him, Shebalov, but look into the matter. If he's lying — that's one thing; but if he's on our side then there's no need for you to shake him off. Get off your horse, you've still got time."

"Chubuk!" the commander said sternly. "What sort of talk is that? Is that the way to talk to a commander? Am I your commander or not? Am I your commander, I'm asking you?"

"Absolutely!" Chubuk agreed calmly.

"Well, then, I can get off without any of your lip."

He jumped off the horse, threw the reins over the fence and strode off toward the house, his sword clanking.

It was only inside, by the light of a crude, greasy lamp, that I got a good look at him. His lean, narrow face was clean-shaven, and rugged. Bushy blond eyebrows converged over his nose, and from under them peered a pair of friendly eyes which he purposely squinted, most likely to give his face a properly stern expression. From the time he took to read my papers and the way he moved his lips as he read, I gathered that he was not too well educated. After reading my papers he gave them to Chubuk and said with a shade of doubt:

"If they're not forged, then I take it they're valid. What do you think, Chubuk?"

"Uh-huh!" the other agreed calmly, cramming some makhorka into his curved pipe.

"Well, how did you get here?" the commander asked.

I told my story with feeling, afraid that he might not believe me. But apparently he did, for when I finished he stopped squinting, turned to Chubuk and said good-naturedly:

"If he isn't lying, then he's telling the truth about being on our side. What do you make of it, Chubuk?"

"Uh-huh," Chubuk confirmed calmly, knock-

ing his pipe against the sole of his boot to shake out the ashes.

"Well, so what'll we do with him?"

"We can put him in the First Company and let Sukharev give him the rifle that's left over from Pashka who was killed," Chubuk suggested.

The commander pondered the matter, drummed on the table with his fingers, and then ordered in a grave tone:

"Well, then, Chubuk, you take him over to the First Company and tell Sukharev to give him Pashka's rifle, and also the regular issue of cartridges. Tell him to enter this man on the roll of our revolutionary detachment.

"*Zing-zing! Zick-zack!*" the sword, spurs and Mauser clanked. Throwing the door open, the commander leisurely walked down the steps and over to his horse.

"Let's go," said the deliberate Chubuk. He suddenly patted me on the shoulder.

Once more the signalman's bugle called softly. The horses neighed more vigorously, the carts creaked louder. Feeling tremendously happy, I smiled as I strode along to my new comrades. We marched all that night. Toward morning we boarded a train that was waiting for us at a little way station. By evening a battered locomotive

was brought up and we rolled away to the South, to help the detachments and workers' militia groups fighting against the Germans, Gaidamaks\* and Krasnov's forces, who had occupied the Donbas.

Our group bore the proud name of "Special Detachment of the Revolutionary Proletariat." Consisting of about a hundred and fifty men in all, it was a foot detachment, but it had its own mounted scout unit of fifteen under Fedya Syrtsov. The detachment was commanded by Shebalov, a shoemaker whose fingers still had cuts from working with waxed end and whose hands were still stained black from dye. Our commander was an odd fellow. The men treated him with respect, although they made fun of some of his idiosyncrasies. One was his fondness for show: his horse was bedecked with red ribbons, his spurs (real museum pieces they were) were extraordinarily long, curved and spiked — I had seen spurs like those only in pictures of mediaeval knights; his long, nickel-plated sword reached to the ground, and on the cover of his wooden holster was a little copper disc with the following legend engraved on it: "If I die, you

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\* Gaidamaks — the name given to units of counter-revolutionary, nationalist troops during the Civil War in the Ukraine.

die with me, you snake!" They said that back home he had a wife and three boys, the eldest of whom was already working. He had returned home from the front after the February Revolution and gone back to shoe repairing. But when the Cadets began to attack the Kremlin he put on his Sunday suit and a pair of chrome leather boots he had just made to order for a customer, obtained a rifle at the workers' militia quarters on Arbat Street and, as he himself put it, "plunged headlong into the revolution for keeps."

#### *Chapter Four*

Three days later our detachment hastily detrained a short distance from Shakhtnaya Station.

A young cavalryman galloped up from somewhere or other, handed Shebalov a packet and said with a smile, as though he were imparting a bit of pleasant news:

"Yesterday the Germans wiped out a hell of a lot of our men at Kraushkov. Was that a hot time!"

Our detachment was ordered to by-pass the enemy units stationed in the various little villages and to penetrate into the rear, where we

were to contact Begichev's detachment of Donetz miners.

"Contact!?" Shebalov grumbled, jabbing at the map with his finger. "Where'll I find that detachment? Look — they write that it's somewhere between Oleshkin and Sosnovka! They ought to tell me the exact spot instead of talking about contacting it somewhere between...."

Shebalov cursed chiefs of staff who did not understand a thing about running a war but were only good at writing out orders. He called for his company commanders. Though he had cursed the staff officers, Shebalov was pleased at receiving an independent assignment and not being subordinated to a larger detachment.

There were three company commanders: a placid, clean-shaven Czech named Galda, Sukharev, a morose corporal, and Fedya Syrtsov, a jolly fellow of twenty-three who liked to dance and play the accordion, and who used to be a shepherd.

The four of them squatted in a clearing before a map, surrounded by a close-packed crowd of Red Army men.

"Well," said Shebalov, holding up a slip of paper. "According to these orders I received, we have to get into the enemy's rear in order to operate near Begichev's detachment. We start out tonight, and the idea is to steer clear

of the enemy detachments we meet. Is that clear?"

"Steer clear of them? How can we do that?" Fedya Syrtsov asked with cunning naiveté.

"By steering clear of them," Shebalov replied, quickly turning his head toward Fedya and showing him his fist. "I know you, you devil! You just try barging into them! Better forget those tricks of yours right now!"

"So we set out at night," he continued. "No carts. The horses will carry the machine gun and the cartridges so there won't be any noise or clattering. If you see a village, go around it carefully and don't make for it like a pack of hungry dogs after some tripe. This concerns you particularly, Fyodor. When your men spot a farm, even if it's out of their way, they make for it and straight for the cream."

"My men too," Galda the Czech admitted. "Last time my scouts, they come back with a bowl of dough. 'What for do you want dough,' I ask them. 'To bake,' they said."

Everybody burst out laughing. Even Shebalov had to smile.

"That was back on the other side of Debaltsevo," laughed Vaska Shmakov, who was sitting next to me. "It's about us he's complaining. We were out scouting and came across a Cossack; a rich Cossack he was too. His men opened fire

on us, but we got to his farm just the same. By that time they had all run away. The stove was going, and this dough was on the table. We burned down the farmhouse and the sheds. But we took the dough and baked it that evening over our campfire. Swell dough it was, rich stuff, real cake."

"You burned them down?" I asked. "Is it right to do that?"

"We burned them down to the ground," Vaska replied coolly. "Why shouldn't we, if the owners fired at us? Those Cossacks are a mean lot. He's rich. He should care — he'd rather build a new house than fight."

"And if he gets still angrier and hates the Reds still more for it?"

"He can't hate them any more than he does," Vaska answered grimly. "The ones who are rich can't hate us any more than they do already. They caught our Petka Kokshin and whipped him three days in a row before they finally finished him off. And you say 'more'. Isn't that hating enough?"

Before setting out that night, the men cooked cereal with pork, baked potatoes in the coals, cleaned their rifles, and lay around on the grass, resting. In Company Commander Sukharev's cart I noticed an extra army coat. It was old and the hem was singed, but it was still sturdy and

could be worn. I asked Sukharev to let me have it.

"What do you want it for?" he inquired gruffly. "You have a coat of your own, out of good cloth too. I need that coat myself. I want to make a pair of trousers out of it."

"Make a pair out of mine," I proposed. "Honest. All the other fellows are wearing army coats, and I stick out like a crow in this black thing."

"Well, well!" Sukharev looked at me in surprise. His rugged peasant face registered a smile of disbelief. Then he added quickly, "Want to swap? Why, of course. What sort of soldier do you make in a coat like that, come to think of it! You don't look like anything at all. This army coat's a bit frazzled at the edges, but that's nothing — you can shorten it a bit. And I'll throw in a grey fur hat I don't need."

We swapped coats, both of us satisfied with the deal. As I walked away, in the uniform of a regular Red Army man, with a rifle slung over my shoulder, I heard him say to Vaska:

"I'll send it off to the old woman the first chance I get. He doesn't want it — if a bullet makes a hole in it the whole coat'll be spoiled. Won't my old woman be tickled pink!"

That night, Fedya Syrtsov picked up two guides at the very first farm we came to. He

wanted two of them to make sure the detachment would not get onto a road held by the enemy. The guides were separated, and when, at forks in the road, one said we had to go a certain way, we followed his advice only if the other said so too.

At first we marched through a forest, two abreast, stumbling on the heels of those in front. Fedya Syrtsov had had the horses' hoofs wrapped in rags. Toward daybreak we turned off a road we had been following and entered a woods. When we came out to a clearing we decided to rest: it was dangerous to go any farther while it was light. Lookouts were posted behind some raspberry bushes by the roadside. Around noon the west wind carried to us the deep rumble of artillery fire.

Shebalov walked past looking worried. Fedya strode by his side with a light, springy step, speaking rapidly. They stopped near Sukharev.

I overheard the following conversation:

"Send a few scouts down along the ravine."

"Mounted?"

"No, they'll be too noticeable. Detail three of your men, Sukharev."

In a low voice, putting it almost as a request, Shebalov said, "Chubuk, you be in charge. Take Shmakov and someone else, of your more reliable men."

"Take me, Chubuk," I begged softly. "I'll be very reliable."

"Take Simka Gorshkov," Sukharev proposed.

"Me, Chubuk," I whispered again. "I'll be the most reliable."

"Uh huh," said Chubuk. He nodded his head.

I jumped up and almost shouted with joy, unable to believe that I would be taken along on such a serious assignment. I had strapped on my cartridge belt and slung my rifle over my shoulder when I suddenly stopped, disconcerted by Sukharev's piercing, distrustful stare.

"Why are you taking him?" he asked Chubuk. "He's liable to ruin the whole business. You'd better take Simka."

"Simka?" Chubuk asked, as though pondering the point. He struck a match and lit his pipe.

"Fool!" I whispered to myself, turning pale for shame and anger at Sukharev. "How can he talk about me like that before everybody? If they won't take me I'll go on my own. I'll sneak right into the village and get all the information. And Sukharev can go and boil himself!"

Chubuk puffed at his pipe, clicked the bolt of his rifle, slipped four cartridges into the magazine, put the fifth in the barrel, and set the safety lock.

"Simka?" he said indifferently, unaware of what his decision meant to me. "Well, for that matter we can take Simka." He adjusted his

bandoleer, and then, glancing at my white face, suddenly grinned and said gruffly: "Speaking about Simka. . . . He — this fellow can also do things if he has a mind to. Come on, boy!"

I dashed toward the edge of the clearing.

"Stop!" Chubuk shouted sternly. "Don't act like a colt. You're not going on a joy ride. Got a grenade? No? Take one of mine. Wait — don't stick it in your pocket handle end first. When you take it out the ring might slip off. Put it in the other way round. That's the way. Ekh, you hothead!" he added in a gentler tone

### *Chapter Five*

"You follow the right slope," Chubuk ordered. "Shmakov'll take the left, and I'll stick to the middle. The moment you see anything, let me know."

We moved ahead slowly. Half an hour later I caught sight of Shmakov near the left ridge, a little way behind me. He was creeping along, his head thrust forward. His face, ordinarily so good-natured and mischievous, was now set and grim.

I came to a bend and lost sight of both Shmakov and Chubuk. I knew that they were somewhere close by, stealing along from bush to bush

just as I was doing, and the fact that although separated we were closely united by our common task and common danger gave me greater courage. The ravine widened. The underbrush grew thicker. Another bend, and I threw myself flat to the ground.

A large cavalry detachment was moving along a broad, stone-paved road not more than a hundred paces from the right slope of the ravine.

The sleek black horses jauntily carried their riders. In front rode three or four officers. The detachment came to a halt opposite to where I was lying. I saw the commander take out a map and begin to study it.

I crawled down backwards and glanced around to see if I could find Chubuk and give him the signal. I was frightened, but also proud that I had not come scouting for nothing, that it was I, and not somebody else, who had first caught sight of the enemy.

"Where's Chubuk anyway?" I thought in alarm, looking around the gully. "What could have become of him?" I was about to go down to the bottom and search for him when I noticed a bush rustling slightly on the left slope. I had been mistaken in thinking I was the only one to spot the enemy.

On the opposite slope Vaska Shmakov cautiously bent forward from behind a bush and

made some strange and alarming signs with his hand, pointing to the bottom of the ravine.

At first I thought he was ordering me to go down, but after following the direction of his hand I gasped and ducked my head.

A White soldier was leading his horse through the thick brush at the bottom of the ravine. He may have been looking for a watering place, or he may have been one of the column's security flank patrols, but at any rate he was an enemy who had penetrated into the disposition of our scout detail. I didn't know what I was supposed to do now. He soon disappeared in a thicket. I could see only Vaska, but Vaska apparently saw something else from where he stood.

He was on one knee, leaning on his rifle with one hand, and stretching out the other hand warning me not to stir. He kept his eyes on the bottom of the ravine, ready to jump.

I heard the sound of hoofs on my right and glanced over my shoulder. The cavalry detachment had turned off onto a country road and was galloping down it. At the same moment Vaska made a sweeping gesture with his hand and leaped. I did the same. When I reached the bottom I dashed to the right and found two men grappling on the ground near a bush. One was Chubuk, and the other was the White soldier. In a flash I was at their side. Chubuk was

underneath, clutching the hand of the White, who was trying to pull his revolver out of his holster. Instead of laying the enemy out with the butt of my rifle I lost my head, flung my rifle to the ground and began to pull at his legs, but he was very heavy and pushed me away. Then I dropped down, seized his hand and bit his finger. The White howled and jerked his hand away. Suddenly the bushes parted with a loud swish, and Vaska, wet to the waist, jumped out and with a skilful, trained hand brought his rifle butt down on the soldier's head.

Chubuk rose from the grass, coughing and spluttering.

"Vaska," he said in a hoarse, choked voice. He pointed to the horse nibbling at the grass.

"Aha," replied Vaska. He picked up the trailing reins and pulled them.

"Take him along," Chubuk said curtly, pointing to the stunned Gaidamak.

Vaska lifted him up.

"Bind his arms."

Chubuk picked up my rifle, cut the strap off with two strokes of his bayonet and tied the unconscious man by the elbows.

"Take him by the feet!" he shouted to me. "Hurry up, you slowpoke!" he growled, noticing my confusion.

We threw our prisoner over the back of the

horse. Vaska jumped into the saddle and without saying a word struck the horse with his whip and galloped off along the uneven floor of the ravine.

"Come on," Chubuk, flushed and sweating, barked hoarsely as he pulled at my arm. "Follow me."

He began to climb the slope, grabbing at branches for support.

"Hold on," he said, as we reached the top. "Down!"

We had scarcely ducked behind some bushes when five horsemen appeared below. This was obviously the main body of the flank patrol. The men reined in their horses and looked around; they were evidently searching for their comrade. Suddenly we heard loud oaths from below. All five pulled their carbines off their shoulders. One of them jumped off his horse and picked something up. It was the cap of the soldier which we had left lying on the grass in our haste. The cavalrymen began to talk excitedly, and one of them, evidently their senior, pointed ahead.

"They'll catch up with Vaska," I thought. "He has a heavy load with him. There are five of them, and he's all alone."

"Throw your grenade!" Chubuk ordered, and I saw something flash in his hand and fly through

the air. The dull explosion that followed stunned me for a moment.

"Throw it!" Chubuk cried. He grabbed my upraised hand, snatched the grenade out of it and, slipping the safety catch, flung the grenade down into the ravine.

"You chump!" he snapped. I was completely stunned by the explosions and bewildered by the rapid succession of dangerous situations. "Chump! Jerked the ring off but left the safety catch on!"

We ran across a freshly ploughed field. The Whites could not very well get through the dense brush on horseback and were probably making their way on foot. We reached another ravine, turned down a road, cut across another field and plunged into a thicket. Somewhere far behind us we could hear shots.

"Do you think they've caught up with Vaska?" I asked in a strange, trembling voice.

"No," said Chubuk, listening intently. "They're just shooting to get it off their chests. Well, step on it, boy, we'll have to go faster. Now we'll double on our tracks."

We walked along in silence. I imagined that Chubuk was angry at me and despised me for dropping my rifle in fright and biting the soldier's finger in that idiotic, childish way, for my hands trembling when I helped throw the prisoner onto

the horse's back, and chiefly for having lost my head when I had to throw the grenade. I felt even more ashamed and mortified at the thought that Chubuk would tell the men about me, and that Sukharev would take this opportunity to say: 'Didn't I tell you not to bother with him? You should have taken Simka along instead of him!' Tears of mortification and anger at myself and my cowardice welled up in my eyes.

Chubuk came to a stop and drew out his tobacco pouch. As he filled his pipe I noticed that his fingers also trembled slightly. He lit up and puffed greedily at his pipe several times as though he were swallowing cold water. Then he put his pouch back into his pocket, patted me on the shoulder and said simply and gaily:

"Well, brother, it looks like we're still alive, eh? It's all right, Borka, you're okay. That was a funny one — biting him!" Chubuk laughed good-naturedly. "Just like a wolf cub, you were! Well, the rifle's not the only thing you use in war, brother — teeth can also come in handy!"

"And what about the grenade?" I muttered guiltily. "How could I have wanted to throw it with the safety catch on?"

"The grenade?" Chubuk smiled. "You're not the only one who's done that, brother. At the beginning almost everybody throws it the wrong way, either with the safety catch on, or without

a detonator at all. When I was young I threw it that way too. I'd get so flustered and mixed up I'd forget to pull the ring, let alone slip the safety catch. I'd throw it like a stone — and let it go at that. Well, let's get a move on. We still have a long way to go."

It was with a light step that I covered the rest of the way to the camp. Fatigue dropped off, and I had the same feeling of peace and uplift as after examinations at school.

Sukharev would never say another bad word about me!

Vaska had turned his unconscious prisoner over to the commander by the time we reached camp. Toward daybreak the White came to and during interrogation said that an armoured train was guarding the railroad line we were supposed to cross, that there was a German battalion at the flag station and that Captain Zhikharev's White-guard detachment was billeted in Glukhovka.

The bright foliage around us gave off the scent of bird cherry trees in blossom. After their rest the boys were cheerful and even lighthearted. Fedya Syrtsov and his merry cavalrymen returned from reconnaissance and reported that the road ahead was clear and that the peasants of the little village in the vicinity were all for the Reds. The local landowner, who fled from his estate at the beginning of October, had come

back three days ago and was now making a round of the cottages with a few soldiers to see if he couldn't find some of the things that had disappeared from the estate. The people in whose homes they found things belonging to the landowner were flogged on the church square, flogged worse than during serfdom. It was only natural that the peasants should welcome the Reds.

After eating a slab of bacon and drinking my tea, I got up and went over to a knot of Red Army men around the prisoner.

"Hello there!" Vaska Shmakov hailed me heartily. He was wiping the sweat off his face with his coat sleeve after downing a full can of boiling hot tea. "What about yesterday's business eh, brother?"

"What business?"

"You know — throwing your rifle down."

"Well, and how come you jumped first but came up to help after me?" I snapped back.

"I jumped right into a bog, brother. Could hardly get my feet out. That's why I ran up so late. We did a nice little job anyway.... When I heard the grenade explode behind me afterwards, I thought it was goodbye to both of you. Honest, that's just what I thought — goodbye forever. I galloped up here and told the boys: 'They're in for it; doesn't look as if they'll come

out alive.' And I thought to myself: 'That's what comes of not wanting to swap pouches with me, and now the Whites'll get it!' It's a nice pouch you've got." He felt the strap of the flat pouch I had taken from the boy I killed, and which was now hanging over my shoulder. "Well, to hell with your pouch if you don't want to swap it," he added. "Last month I had a better one, only I sold it. You think yours is the world's best, don't you!" He sniffed in scorn.

I looked at Vaska. His face was so stupid and red, and his movements so clumsy, that I could hardly believe it was really he who had crept yesterday through the brush so stealthily after the Whites and whipped the stubborn horse so furiously as he galloped off with the prisoner over his saddle.

Some of the men were still finishing their breakfast, others were buttoning up their tunics or putting on their footcloths. The detachment was preparing to set out again.

I was ready for the march, and so I strolled out to the edge of the forest to look at the bird cherry trees in bloom.

I heard footsteps off to one side. The captured Gaidamak with three of our men and Chubuk walking behind him came into view.

"Where are they going to?" I wondered, glancing at the grim-faced, dishevelled prisoner.

"Halt!" commanded Chubuk. The group came to a stop.

One glance at the White and then at Chubuk told me why the prisoner had been brought here; lifting my feet with difficulty, I ran off to the side and threw my arms around the trunk of a birch tree.

A crisp, businesslike shot rang out.

"Look, boy," Chubuk said sternly, with a shade of pity in his voice. "If you think that war is a game or a picnic you'd better go back home! A White is a White, and there ain't any middle way between them and us. They shoot us, and we won't take pity on them either!"

I looked up at Chubuk with tear-dimmed eyes.

"I won't go home, Chubuk," I said in a soft, but resolute tone. "It's only that it was so sudden. I'm a Red — I came to fight of my own free will —" I faltered, and then added ever so softly, as if apologizing, "for the radiant kingdom of Socialism."

### *Chapter Six*

Peace had long been signed between Russia and Germany; nonetheless German troops swarmed all over the Ukrainian republic, which was counter-revolutionary at that time; they had even pushed into the Donetz Basin, where they were

helping the Whites form detachments. The blustering spring winds breathed fire and smoke as they swept over the green fields.

Our detachment, like dozens of other guerilla groups, operated in the rear almost independently, at our own risk. During the daytime we hid in the fields and gullies or rested in the vicinity of some remote farmstead; at night we raided little railroad stations held down by small garrisons. We set up ambushes along the country roads to waylay enemy baggage trains, intercept military reports and scatter German foragers.

At first I felt ashamed of the way we fled from large enemy detachments and evaded open combat with them. In the month and a half since I joined the detachment I had not yet taken part in one real battle. There had been some skirmishes and some attacks on sleeping Whites and Whites who had fallen behind their units. There was no counting the wires cut and the telegraph poles sawed down — but there had not been one real battle.

"That's what we're guerillas for," Chubuk declared without the slightest embarrassment when I told him what I thought of the unbecoming behaviour of the detachment. "You'd like us to form in a column, like you see on the pictures, stick out our rifles and march off, eh? Throw out our chests and show them how brave

we are! How many machine guns have we got? One, and only three belts of ammunition to go with it. And Zhikharev has four Maxims and two field pieces. How the hell can we tackle 'em? We've got to fight a different way. We guerillas are like wasps: small, but with a sting. We swarm down, sting 'em and fly off. Bravery just for the sake of show won't get us any place. That wouldn't be bravery but stupidity!"

I came to know many of the men during that period. Many were the tales my comrades told of their lives at night while we were on patrol, or in the evenings around a campfire, or as we lay under the cherry trees of a garden in the sweltering haze of midday.

One day Malygin, a morose, sullen man who had lost an eye in a mine explosion, told us his story.

"There's nothing to tell," he began. "To put it in a nutshell, life was hard. For the last twenty years my life was divided into three equal parts. I'd crawl out of bed at six with a hangover, pull on my clothes, get my lamp and bango — down the shaft. Down there it was always the same thing: bore, stick in the dynamite and blast away. I'd blast away until I got deaf and dizzy. Then back to the surface, all wet and black, just like the devil. That's Part One of my life. Then I went to the liquor store and got a bottle. They

didn't ask for any money — the office paid. Then I went to the grocery. I showed my bottle and got two sour pickles, some rye bread and a herring. That was the portion per bottle. Gobble it all down and don't worry your head: the office would deduct the cost from your pay. That's Part Two. And the third part was to lie down and go to sleep. I used to sleep like a log. I liked sleeping more than drinking vodka even — because of the dreams I had. I still don't know what causes dreams, and where all the strange things you see in your dreams come from. For instance, I once dreamed that the foreman calls for me and says, 'Go along to the office, Malygin, and get your discharge.' 'What for?' says I. 'Because,' says he, 'you're aiming to marry the director's daughter.' 'Go on,' says I, 'did you ever hear of a miner getting married to the director's daughter? How could I even dream of it,' I says, 'when an ordinary girl would think twice about marrying me because of my eye?'

"Then everything gets mixed up and muddled. The foreman turns out to be the director's horse, harnessed to his buggy. The director himself climbs out of the buggy, greets me politely and says, 'Here, Malygin, you marry my daughter. I'm giving her a dowry of ten thousand rubles, plus the foreman, that is, the horse and buggy.'

I'm dizzy with joy, and I'm just about to thank him when he hits me with his cane — once, twice and a third time, and the foreman begins to stamp his hoofs and neigh: 'Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Can you beat that?' And he keeps on stamping his hoofs. And he stamped them so hard I yelled in my sleep. Almost woke the whole barracks up. Somebody even punched me in the ribs to make me shut up."

"Some dream!" Fedya Syrtsov laughed. "You must have had an eyeful of the director's daughter to get a dream like that. With me it's this way most of the time: The last thing I think about in the evening I'm sure to see in my dreams. The other day I didn't have a chance to pull the boots off a dead German — swell boots they were, too, made of kidskin — so I've been dreaming of them every night since!"

"Boots! You're a boot yourself!" Malygin snapped back. I saw that daughter of the director's only once, and a year before I had the dream, at that. I'm lying drunk in a ditch, and she and her mama walk past, with their horse and buggy tagging after them. Her mama — she's one of those grand dames with grey hair — comes up to me and says, 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You don't even resemble a human being. Why don't you remember there's a God in Heaven?' 'Pardon me,' says I, 'but I

drink just because I don't resemble a human being.'

"Well, when the lady hears that, she takes pity on me. She gives me ten kopeks and says, 'Look around you, muzhik. Nature's rejoicing, the sun's shining, the birds are singing, and you're sprawling here drunk. Go and get yourself some soda water and sober up.' That made me good and mad, and I says to her: 'I'm no muzhik but a worker at your own mine. Let nature rejoice, and you're welcome to rejoice with it, but I've got nothing to rejoice about. I never drank a drop of soda water in my life, lady, and if you want to do a man a good turn, add another ten kopeks to make up the price of half a bottle. I'll drink to this pleasant meeting of ours with the greatest gratitude.' 'You pig!' the big-hearted lady yells. 'Tomorrow I'll tell my husband to fire you!' Then they get into the buggy and ride off.

"That's all we said to each other. And the daughter was standing with her back turned to us the whole time. And you say I got an eyeful!"

"How come you saw her in your dream then?" chuckled Fedya Syrtsov. "Want me to tell you about how I met a countess? Honest, now, what happened then plopped me straight into the revolution. If I told you about it you'd hardly believe your ears!"

Fedya tossed his curls and narrowed his eyes like a cat sneaking out of the pantry.

"Going to tell a tall one, eh, Fedya?" Vasya Shmakov asked with some mistrust, sitting down closer to him.

"You can believe it or not for all I care — I'm not going to produce any proof."

Fedya stretched himself, shook his head as though wondering whether it was worth while telling the story, and then, with a click of his tongue, began:

"This was three years ago. I don't have to tell you I was a handsome fellow those days — handsomer than now even. Well, things turned out so that I had to take a job as herder's assistant on a count's estate. This count had a wife by the name of Emilia, and she had a maid named Anna, whom they called Jeanette.

"One day I was sitting near the pond tending my herd when the two of them came strolling along with parasols. The countess had a white parasol, and Jeanette had a red one. That Jeanette, by the way, looked like a dried haddock — skinny, she was, and with eyeglasses, and whenever she had to pass through the village she covered her nose with a handkerchief against the smell of manure. Gave her a headache, you know.

"In that herd of mine I had a bull — a real Simmenthal (that's a kind of breed) — and a huge fellow he was. Well, when that bull spotted the red parasol, he made a bee line for Jeanette. I jumped up and tried to cut across his path. The ladies screamed. The countess jumped into a bush, but Jeanette didn't know where to run and finally dived into the pond. The Simmenthal came rushing down at her, but instead of throwing the parasol away, the fool tried to shield herself with it — nice way of defending oneself, ain't it! And she kept squealing something in German, or maybe French, the devil knows. I dived into the water, tore the parasol out of her hand and hit at the Simmenthal with it. That made the bull awful mad, and he began to chase me. I swam to the middle of the pond, threw the parasol away, and then made for the other shore and into the bushes. By this time the herders came running over and raised an awful racket. They chased the bull away and pulled Jeanette out of the mud. When they got her out onto the shore she fainted."

Fedya was breathing heavily, as though he had just escaped from the bull. He clicked his tongue and was about to continue when someone called from the porch of the farm:

"Fedya Syrtsov! The commander wants you!"

"Right away," Fedya waved his hand in

annoyance. He smiled to us and resumed his story.

"Well, while Jeanette was coming to, Countess Emilia walked up to me, all pale and trembling and sobbing. 'Young man,' she said, 'who are you?' 'Why, I'm the herder's assistant, Your Excellence, and my name's Fyodor Syrtsov.' Then the countess sighed and said, 'Theodore' — that's their way of saying Fyodor — 'Theodore, come closer to me.'"

I did not hear what else the countess had to say to Fedya or learn what the whole story had to do with his joining the Reds later on, for at that moment there was a jangle of spurs, and Shebalov, infuriated, strode up to us.

"Fyodor," he said sternly, leaning on his sword. "Were you told to come to me?"

"Yes," said Fedya, sitting up. "Well, what do you want?"

"What do you mean, what do I want? Are you supposed to go to the commander when he calls for you, or not?"

"Aye, Your Honour, and what can I do for you?" Fedya replied with a sneer.

Ordinarily Shebalov was easy-going and good-natured; but now Fedya's tone stung him to the quick.

"You don't have to 'Your Honour' me," he replied gravely and with a shade of regret. "I'm

not 'Your Honour,' and you're not my inferior. But I'm the commander of the detachment and must demand obedience. Some peasants from the Temlyukov farmstead have just been here."

"Well?" Fedya's eyes shifted uneasily with guilt.

"They had a complaint to make. 'Your scouts came over to our village,' they said. 'Of course, we were very glad to see them — being on the same side, you know. Their senior, a dark fellow, called a meeting for the support of Soviet power. He spoke about the land and about the land-owners. But while we were listening to him and drawing up a resolution, his men began snooping around in our cellars for cream and catching chickens.'

"What sort of business is this, eh, Fyodor? Maybe you've made a little mistake and ought to join up with the Gaidamaks? That's their way of doing things. But in my detachment there's no room for such disgraceful behaviour!"

Fedya maintained a scornful silence. He lowered his eyes and flicked his boot with the end of his whip.

"This is the last time I'm talking to you about it, Fyodor," Shebalov continued, fingering the red knot of his shiny sword. "I'm not 'Your Honour.' I'm a shoemaker and a simple man, but since I've been appointed commander I demand that you

obey me. And I declare for the last time, before everybody here, that if you go on behaving the same way I'll disregard the fact that you're a good fighter and comrade and throw you out of the detachment!"

Fedya shot an arrogant look at Shebalov, swept his eyes over the men crowding around, and, finding no support in any of them, except for three or four cavalymen who were smiling at him in agreement, he began to glower.

"Look here, Shebalov I'd advise you not to fling people about," he said with ill-concealed anger. "Nowadays people are scarce!"

"I'll throw you out," Shebalov said in a low voice. He walked unhurriedly over to the porch, keeping his eyes on the ground.

This conversation between Shebalov and Syrtsov left a bad taste in my mouth. I knew that Shebalov was right, yet I sided with Fedya. "He could have told him," I thought, "but he didn't have to threaten him."

Fedya was one of our best soldiers, and he was always jolly and full of life. If we had to get some information, or stage a sudden raid on foragers, or creep up to an estate that was guarded by Whites, Fedya would always find the most convenient and stealthiest way to go about it.

Fedya loved to steal up softly, so that hoofs

did not clatter, so that spurs did not jangle, so that horses did not neigh — if they did, he would punch them in the head, so that riders did not whisper — if they did, he would bring his whip down on their backs without a word. Fedya's trained horses did not neigh, and his men, glued to their saddles, did not whisper; and he himself would head the scout group, bending slightly over his horse's shaggy mane, like a pangolin zigzagging up to a fat fly fluttering in the grass.

But when the enemy sentries woke up to what was happening and sounded the alarm, the flexible little group would charge with whoops, whistles, rifle shots and grenade explosions before the startled White had a chance to pull on his pants, or the sleepy machine gunner could load his gun. At such times Fedya loved noise. No matter if the bullets went wild, no matter if the grenade exploded in the grass, only sending the crazed chickens and fat geese flying almost to the chimney tops — no matter, as long as there was plenty of noise and panic. Let the confused enemy think that untold numbers of Reds have burst into the village. Let the fingers that grip the rifles tremble, let the machine gun so hastily pulled up choke on its twisted belt, and, above all, let a soldier or two come tumbling, groggy from sleep, out of a cottage, drop his gun and,

before even seeing anything, begin to yell like a madman as he staggers toward the fence:

"We're surrounded! The Reds have surrounded us!"

At this grenades would be tucked back inside belts, rifles would once more be slung over shoulders, and the cold, swishing, sharp-edged sabres of Fedya's battle-flushed scouts go silently to work.

That was our Fedya Syrtsov.

"Is it right," thought I, "to throw a priceless man like that out of our detachment because of a couple of chickens and some cream?"

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I was still thinking about Shebalov's quarrel with Fedya when Chubuk called out from his lookout post on the roof of the farmhouse that a large foot detachment was coming up the road. The men began to run about helter-skelter. It seemed as though no commander would be able to bring this tumultuous mass into any semblance of order. But each man knew what to do without receiving instructions. The men of Galda's company examined their revolvers on the run, bolted the remnants of their breakfast and, bending low, ran to the edge of the farmstead, where they threw themselves on the ground to form an ever-thickening chain. The scouts tightened

saddle girths, bridled horses, and untied or impatiently cut their horses' hobbles with their swords. The machine gunners took down their Colt and cartridge belts from the carriage. The men of the Second Company followed the red-faced, sweating Sukharev down a path leading out to the fringe of the copse. In a few minutes everything was quiet. Shebalov came down from the porch and issued instructions to Fedya as he crossed the yard. Fedya nodded his head as much as to say, 'Okay, it'll be done.' The shutters were closed, and the owner of the farm went down into the cellar with the women and children.

"Wait," Shebalov said to me. "You stay here. Climb up to the roof and let me know what Chubuk sees. I'll be out at the edge of the copse. And tell him to keep an eye on the right and see whether anything's coming up along the Khamur road."

One, two, *zick, zack*.... A duck quacked lazily as it basked in the sunshine. An orange cock perched on the fence crowed lustily and reared his grease-stained tail feathers. When he fell silent and landed in the middle of a clump of dusty burdocks with a heavy flap of his wings, the farm became so quiet that out of the stillness rose sounds which up to then had been drowned out — the twittering of a lark and the droning

of the bees gathering drops of warm, fragrant nectar from the flowers.

"What's the matter?" Chubuk asked when I had climbed up on the thatched roof.

"Shebalov sent me to help you."

"All right. Sit still and don't stick your head out."

"Keep your eye on the right, Chubuk," I said, repeating Shebalov's instructions, "and see if anything's coming up along the Khamur road."

"You sit still," he rejoined curtly, taking off his hat and poking his big head past the corner of the chimney.

The enemy detachment could not be seen; it had disappeared in a hollow, but it was bound to show up again any moment. The thatch was slippery, so I dug a little toe hold in it to keep from sliding down, trying at the same time to move as little as possible. Chubuk's head was right next to my face. Only now did I notice the streaks of grey in his coarse black hair. "Is he really an old man already?" I wondered.

Somehow it was odd to find Chubuk an old man, with greying temples and crows' feet around his eyes. And yet there he was sitting next to me on the roof, his legs clumsily spread apart to keep from sliding, and his big shaggy head thrust past the corner of the chimney.

"Chubuk!" I whispered.

"What?"

"Chubuk. You know, you're pretty old already," I blurted out before I knew what I was saying.

"Id-i-ot," said Chubuk, turning angrily. "What are you wagging your tongue for?"

Suddenly he lowered his head to the straw and crawled back a little. The detachment was coming out of the hollow. I felt a wave of anxiety overcome Chubuk. He began to fidget and to breathe agitatedly.

"Boris, look!"

"I see."

"Get down and tell Shebalov they're coming up out of the hollow. Tell him there's something suspicious: at first they were marching along in column formation, but while they were in the hollow they reformed into platoons. I think I know what's up. Why would they form into platoons? Maybe they already know we're over here at the farm? Run there and back as fast as you know how!"

I jerked my toe out of the hole in the thatch and slid down the roof onto the back of a fat pig, which squealed and bounded away. I found Shebalov standing behind a tree looking through his binoculars, and told him what Chubuk had said.

"I can see that," Shebalov pouted, as though I had offended him. "I can see that myself."

I realized that he was simply irritated by the enemy's unexpected manoeuvre.

"Run back and remain on the roof. Keep your eye on the flank — on the Khamur road."

I ran back to the empty farmyard and climbed a wattle fence to get to the roof.

"Little soldier!" I heard someone whisper.

I swung round in fright. Who could that be calling me, and where from?

"Little soldier!" the voice repeated.

This time I noticed that the door to the cellar was slightly open. The mistress of the farmstead was peering through it.

"Are they coming?" she whispered.

"Yes," I whispered back.

"And what have they got, machine guns only, or big guns too?" The woman crossed herself. "Oh Lord, let them have machine guns only — they'll surely blast the cottage to smithereens with the big ones."

Before I had a chance to reply a shot rang out and a bullet whizzed past somewhere high overhead.

The woman's head disappeared and the door to the cellar closed with a bang. "Here it comes," I thought. I was gripped by the painful excitement which overcomes a man before battle —

not when rifles are barking all around, and machine guns are spluttering and the big guns join in with their majestic rumble — but when nothing is happening yet and the danger is still ahead.... "Gosh," you think, "why is it so quiet, why is it taking so long? I wish it would begin sooner."

*P-i-i-ng.* A second bullet flew past.

But this was not the beginning yet. The Whites most likely suspected that the farmstead was occupied by Reds, but not being certain, they had fired twice just to see what would happen. Thus the commander of a small scout detail steals up to an enemy outpost with his men, opens fire, and, after determining the strength of the enemy from the answering rifle and machine-gun fire, switches to the other flank. Here the scouts again open fire, alarming the enemy and sending him packing to his main troops. The scouts have not defeated anybody or caused any casualties, yet they have achieved their aim of forcing the invisible enemy to reveal his strength.

Our detachment held its fire.

Five cavalrymen mounted on dancing black steeds separated themselves from the enemy's ranks and, playing with fire, rode ahead at a light trot. They came to a halt about three hundred metres away from us. One of them scanned the farmstead through his binoculars.

We saw his glasses glide over the fence and climb up the roof toward the chimney behind which Chubuk and I were hiding.

"Aren't they smart, though — they certainly know where to look for the observer," I thought, ducking my head behind Chubuk's back. I experienced the unpleasant feeling you have at the front when, against your will, enemy binoculars pick you out, or when a searchlight beam slips past, melting away the darkness as it seeks your column, or when a scout plane circles overhead and there is no shelter within sight — nowhere to hide from those invisible observers.

At such times your head seems immense, your arms terribly long, and your body big and clumsy. You are annoyed because you do not know what to do with yourself: you cannot shrink or roll into a ball or merge with the thatched roof or the grass like the ruffled grey sparrow merges with a pile of twigs under the piercing gaze of a hawk wheeling noiselessly above.

"They've spotted us!" Chubuk exclaimed. "They've spotted us!" And as if to show that there was no more use playing hide and seek, he poked his head round the chimney corner and clicked the bolt of his rifle.

I wanted to climb down and warn Shebalov, but the men at the edge of the copse obviously

knew that their ruse had failed and that the Whites would not advance on the farmslead without first deploying. From behind the trees bullets whizzed at the retreating cavalrymen.

The deployed platoons of the Whites mingled and then unfolded in a thin, broken line to the right and left. The last of the five horses fell to the ground with its rider before reaching the hill along which the Whites were strung out. When the wind had swept away the dust, I saw only the horse lying in the road; the cavalryman, bent almost double, was limping away toward his detachment.

A bullet hit the chimney and spattered us with dust and chalk. We ducked our heads. The chimney was a good target. True, no direct shots could reach us behind it, but we could not stir. If not for Shebalov's orders to watch the Khamur road, we would have climbed down long ago. The desultory firing developed into a regular engagement. Soon the scattered rifle shots of the Whites died down and their machine guns spoke up. Under cover of their fire the uneven chain of Whites advanced a few dozen paces and dropped again. Then the machine guns fell silent and the rifles came back into action. Thus, slowly, but with a stubbornness that spoke of good discipline and training, the Whites came closer and closer.

"Strong, those devils are," Chubuk muttered. "Just look at how they're pushing ahead. They don't act like Zhikharev's men. Could they be Germans?"

"Chubuk!" I cried. "Look at the Khamur road. Something's moving out there by the woods!"

"Where?"

"No, not there. To the right. Look straight across the pond. See?" I had noticed something gleam at the fringe of the woods. It was like the glint of a sunbeam reflected in a piece of glass.

A strange sound rose in the air, like the rattle in a horse's throat when it is throttled. The rattle grew into a loud hum. Then the air began to ring like a cracked church bell, and something crashed close by. At first I thought it was right next to me that the fork of brown lightning streaked out of a cloud of smoke and black dust. The air shuddered and hit me hard in the back like a huge wave of warm water. When I opened my eyes I saw that over in the vegetable garden the dry thatch on the shellblasted barn was burning with pale flames that were barely perceptible in the sunlight.

A second shell exploded in the vegetable beds.

"Let's go down," said Chubuk, turning a grey, anxious face to me. "We'd better get out of this

mess; looks like it's not Zhikharev's men but Germans. They've got a battery out there on the Khamur road."

The first person I met in the copse was the little Red Army man whom we had dubbed Polecat.

He was sitting on the grass, ripping the sleeve of his bloodstained tunic with an Austrian bayonet. His rifle lay at his side; the bolt was open, and a half-ejected cartridge peeped out of it.

"Germans!" he cried without replying to my question. "We're beating it right away!"

I gave him my tin mug to get some water with, and ran on.

Polecat's bloodstained sleeve and what he had said about the Germans were the last things I managed to salvage from my memory later on, when I was recalling my first real battle. But I remember clearly all the subsequent events, beginning with the moment when Vaska Shmakov came up to me in the gully and asked for my tin mug.

"What's that you've got in your hand?" he said.

I looked down and grew red. Clasped tightly in my left hand was a large grey stone. I had no idea how or why it had got there.

"What are you wearing a helmet for, Vaska?" I asked.

"Took it off a German. Give me the mug. I want a drink."

"I haven't got it. I gave it to Polecat."

"You gave it to Polecat?" A long whistle escaped Vaska's lips. "Well, brother, you can kiss it goodbye."

"What do you mean? I only gave it to him so he could get some water."

"Your mug's done for," Vaska said with a wry smile as he dipped his helmet in the creek. "And so's Polecat."

"Killed?"

"To death," Vaska replied, grinning inexplicably. "Polecat's died for the glory of the Red arms."

"Why do you have to grin about it, Vaska?" I said angrily. "Don't you feel at all sorry for Polecat?"

"Me?" Vaska sniffed and wiped his dripping lips with his dirty palm. "Sure I'm sorry. I'm sorry for Polecat, and for Nikishin, and for Sergei, and for myself too. Look how those lousy skunks nicked me in the arm."

He moved his shoulder and I saw that his left arm was bound with a grey rag.

"A flesh wound. It'll be okay," he added. "Burns a little, though." He sniffed again, clicked his tongue, and said in a cheerful tone: "Come to think of it, what's there to be sorry about? No-

body forced us to come here, which means we knew pretty well what to expect. So there's no point in being sorry."

Separate scenes of the battle stand out in my memory, but I cannot put them into their proper order. I remember getting down on one knee and engaging in a rather long duel with a German who was no more than two hundred paces away. Each time I was afraid he would shoot first, and I pressed the trigger before I could get a good aim. Probably he felt the same way, for his bullets also went astray.

I remember, too, how our machine gun was bowled over by an air wave. Our men put it straight at once and dragged it over to another place.

"Pick up the belts!" Sukharev yelled. "Why don't you help, you devils!"

I grabbed one of the boxes lying in the grass and began to haul it. The next thing I remember, Shebalov was shaking me by the shoulder and giving me a piece of his mind. At the time I couldn't make out what it was all about.

Then, I believe, Nikishin was shot down. No — Nikishin was killed earlier, because when I was pulling at the box he fell and cried out to me: "Where the hell are you taking that box? Lug it over to the machine gun!"

Fedya's horse was shot from under him.

"Fedya's crying," Chubuk said. "He's a funny fellow. Crying into the grass. 'Quit it,' I told him. 'We haven't got time enough to cry over people, let alone horses.' He swung around and reached for his pistol. 'Get the hell away from here!' he said, 'or I'll put a bullet in you too.' His eyes were all bloodshot. I spat and left him alone. What's the use of talking to a madman? He's no good, that Fedya," Chubuk continued, puffing on his pipe. "I don't trust that fellow."

"Why not? Isn't he the bravest man we've got?"

"What of it? He's no good, anyway. He doesn't like order. Party members don't mean a thing to him. 'My program,' he says, 'is to beat the Whites until they croak, and then we'll see what's what.' I don't like that program of his. It's a fog, not a program. Just let the wind blow and see what's left of it."

Ten of our men were killed and fourteen were wounded, six of whom died. If we had had an aid station and a few doctors and some medicine, many of the wounded would have lived.

But instead of an aid station we had a clearing in the forest, instead of doctors an aid man named Kalugin, who had fought in the German war, and our sole medicine was iodine. We had a whole kerosene can full of iodine, and were any-

thing but economical with it. I saw Kalugin pour a whole tablespoonful onto Lukoyanov's wound.

"That's all right," he said soothingly. "Bear up. Iodine's good for you. Without iodine you'd be finished, for a fact. And now maybe you'll pull through."

Our ammunition was giving out, and we had to make our way northward to where regular troops of the Red Army were operating. But the wounded tied us down. Five of them were now able to walk; the three others were neither dying nor recovering.

Among the latter was Yashka the Baby Gypsy. Yashka had turned up among us quite unexpectedly.

During the count one day, when the detachment was lined up on the road before setting out from the Arkhipovka farmstead, the end man on the left flank — little Polecat it was, who was killed later on — called out, "A hundred forty-seven incomplete!"

Up till then Polecat had always been the hundred forty-sixth complete.

"What's the great idea?" Shebalov thundered. "Count again from the beginning!"

We counted again, and again Polecat turned out to be the hundred forty-seventh incomplete.

"Hells bells!" Shebalov flared up. "Who's balling up the count, Sukharev?"

"Nobody's balling it up," replied Chubuk from the ranks. "An extra man's turned up."

We looked around. There, between Chubuk and Nikishin, stood a new man. He could have been no more than eighteen or nineteen years old. He was swarthy and had an untidy crop of curly hair.

"Where'd you pop up from?" Shebalov asked in surprise.

The boy said nothing.

"He just took his place here," Chubuk explained. "I thought you'd signed up a new man. He just walked up with his gun and took his place."

"Who are you anyway?" Shebalov asked angrily.

"I'm a Gypsy — a Red Gypsy," the boy replied.

"A R-e-ed G-y-yp-sy?" Shebalov drawled, opening his eyes wide. Then, with a sudden laugh, he said, "What sort of a Gypsy are you? You're only a baby Gypsy!"

The boy stayed on in our detachment, and ever since then was known as Baby Gypsy.

Now Baby Gypsy was down with a bullet wound in his chest. A pallor had spread over his swarthy face, and his dried lips kept whispering strange, unintelligible words.

"I've been in the army a long time," said Vaska Shmakov. "Served half way through the German war, and now too, but I never saw any Gypsy soldiers before. I've seen Tatars, Mordovians, Chuvashes — but no Gypsies. If you ask me, those Gypsies are a bad lot. They don't work the land and they have no trade. All they do is steal horses, and their women fool people. I just can't understand what made him come to us. They've got more freedom than they know what to do with! They don't have to defend any land. What do they want land for? They have nothing in common with the workers either. What's the point, I ask you, in his joining us? He must get something out of it, only try and find out."

"But maybe he's for the revolution too for all you know."

"I'll never believe that a Gypsy's for the revolution. They were beaten for stealing horses before the revolution, and they'll be beaten for it afterwards too!"

"Yes, but maybe they'll stop stealing after the revolution."

Vaska smiled distrustfully.

"Well, I don't know.... In our village we beat them up with clubs and everything, and they just went right on stealing. D'you mean to say the revolution'll make them any different?"

"You're a damn fool, Vaska!" said Chubuk, who had been listening to us in silence. "You can't see past your own house and horse. According to you the whole revolution'll end up in your getting a slice of the landowner's land and a couple of dozen logs free of charge from the landowner's forest, and in the village the elder being substituted by a chairman, but life itself will remain the way it was before."

### *Chapter Seven*

Two days later Baby Gypsy felt better. When I went to see him in the evening, he was lying on a pile of dry leaves, gazing at the black starry sky and softly humming a tune.

"Babe," I said, "let me build up a fire for you. We'll heat some tea and have it together. I've got some milk in my canteen. Okay?"

I ran for water, hung the pot over the fire on a ramrod supported by two bayonets, and sat down next to the wounded boy.

"What's that song you're singing, Babe?" I asked him.

He did not reply at once.

"It's an old song, and it says the Gypsies have no country of their own, but consider the land where they are well received their own. In one

place it says, 'But where are you well received, Gypsy?' And the reply is, 'I've wandered through many lands, I've been to the lands of the Negroes, the Bulgarians, and the Turks; I've crossed many lands with my Gypsy camp, but nowhere have I found a land where my camp was well received.' "

"Babe," I said. "But why did you come to us? You Gypsies don't have to serve in the army, do you?"

His eyes flashed as he raised himself up on one elbow and replied:

"I came of my own free will. Nobody had to force me to come. I'm sick of the Gypsy camp! My father's good at stealing horses, and my mother at telling fortunes. My grandfather stole horses, and my grandmother told fortunes. But none of them managed to steal any happiness for themselves or foretell good fortune for themselves, because their way of living, I think, is not the right way. We ought to live differently."

Baby Gypsy brightened up and tried to raise himself higher, but his wound was still painful. He sank back on the leaves, groaning faintly through clenched teeth.

The milk suddenly boiled over, extinguishing the fire.

Baby Gypsy burst out laughing.

"What's the joke?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing." He tossed his head. "I was just thinking that everybody is like that — the Russians, the Jews, the Georgians, the Tatars. They all bore patiently with the old life and then, like the milk in this pot, boiled over and splashed into the fire. Just like myself, too. I stood it as long as I could, and then I grabbed a gun and went to look for a better life."

"And do you think you'll find it?"

"I couldn't by myself. But all together I think we should be able to — because we want to so badly."

Chubuk came up.

"Sit down and have some tea with us," I invited.

"I have no time," he said. "Coming with me, Boris?"

"Sure," I replied quickly, without asking where we were going.

"Well, then, hurry up and finish your tea. The cart's waiting."

"What cart, Chubuk?"

He called me aside and explained that the detachment was setting out at daybreak to join Begichev's miners' detachment somewhere in the vicinity, after which both parties would make their way together to the main troops. Since we had to go through territory held by the Whites

and the Germans, it would be impossible to take the three wounded men along with us.

In an out-of-the-way place nearby there was an apiary, and the beekeeper, who was on our side, had consented to shelter the wounded men until they recovered. Chubuk had brought a cart from the apiary, and we had to take the wounded men there while it was still dark.

"Who else is coming with us?"

"Nobody else. Just the two of us. I could get along by myself, only the horse is a little restive. One of us will have to hold the reins while the other looks after the men. So you're coming?"

"Of course I am, Chubuk. I'll go anywhere with you, Chubuk. Any time. And where do we go from there? Back here?"

"No. We'll ford the river and join the detachment on the other side. Well, let's go." Chubuk went up to the horse's head. "See that my rifle doesn't fall out," he called out in the darkness.

The cart jerked, brushing against a bush and sending a shower of dewdrops on my face. A bend in the road hid from sight the smouldering campfires, which the men were putting out in preparation for the march.

The road was full of potholes, ruts, and long twining tree roots. It was so dark that I could see neither the horse nor Chubuk. The wounded

lay in silence on their litter of fresh hay. I was walking behind the cart and to avoid stumbling held on to it with my free hand. It was quiet. If not for the monotonous whistling of a lapwing, one might have thought that the darkness around us was dead. No one spoke. At rare intervals only, when the wheels fell into a rut or bumped against a tree stump, the wounded Timoshkin moaned softly.

The sparse woods, in which almost half the trees had been felled, now seemed impassable, dense and wild. The overcast sky hung above us like a black ceiling. The air was warm and stifling, and it seemed as though we were groping down a long, winding corridor.

I don't know why, but I recalled how a long time back, some three years earlier, Father and I had walked home from the railroad station on a warm night like that. We had taken the direct path through the copse. A lapwing was whistling then too, and there was the same smell of over-ripe mushrooms and wild raspberries.

Father had been seeing his brother Peter off, and at the station they had had a few drinks. It might have been the vodka, or perhaps it was the sweet scent of raspberries, but anyway Father was more animated and talkative than usual. As we walked along he told me about his youth and the seminary he had attended. I laughed at the

stories of his school days, and of how the boys were flogged; it seemed to me both ridiculous and incredible that such a tall, strong man like my father could ever have been flogged by anybody.

"You read that in a book," I told him. "It's called *The Essays of a Bursar*. But that happened such a long time ago!"

"Do you think I've just finished school? That was also a long time ago."

"You lived in Siberia, Pa. That's a terrible place, isn't it? Convicts live out there. Petka told me that out there a man can be killed just like that, and there's nobody to complain to."

Father laughed and began to tell me something, but I could not understand it at the time; for it appeared, strangely enough, that convicts were not convicts at all, and that he even had friends among them, and that there were many good people in Siberia, in any case more even than in Arzamas.

But I turned a deaf ear to this, as well as to many other conversations, the meaning of which I was only now beginning to understand.

"No," I thought, "I never suspected or imagined that my father was a revolutionary. But the fact I'm with the Reds and have a rifle over my shoulder has nothing to do with my father's having been a revolutionary, or with my

being his son. It's happened of itself. I arrived at it myself."

This thought made me feel quite proud. Really, now, come to think of it, wasn't it remarkable that I had chosen the truest, the most revolutionary party, when there were so many of them to choose from?

I wanted to talk to Chubuk about it. But I had a sudden feeling that there was no one beside the horse's head, and that the nag was pulling the cart along the unfamiliar road by sheer intuition.

"Chubuk!" I cried out, alarmed.

"Ho!" came his gruff, stern voice. "What're you yelling for?"

"Chubuk," I said in embarrassment, "have we still far to go?"

"Plenty," he replied. He came to a stop. "Come here a moment and spread your coat. I want to light up."

The pipe fluttered like a firefly by the horse's head. The road became smoother, the woods spread away to right and left. We walked side by side.

I told Chubuk what I had been thinking about, expecting him to praise me for my cleverness and farsightedness, which had brought me to the Bolsheviks. But Chubuk was in no hurry to praise me. He smoked at least half a pipe before he said, in a grave tone:

"Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes it happens that a man arrives at it by way of his own brains. There's Lenin, for instance. But as far as you're concerned, kid, I doubt it...."

"But why, Chubuk?" I asked softly. I felt hurt. "Didn't I come here of myself?"

"Of yourself? Fiddlesticks. It only seems so to you. Your life turned out that way — that's why you came of yourself. Your father was shot. That's one. You fell in with that kind of people. That's two. You quarrelled with your school-mates. That's three. You were kicked out of school. That's four. Now, if you leave out all these things, maybe you thought out the rest by yourself. Don't be angry with me," he added, evidently sensing that I was hurt. "Nobody's demanding more from you, you know."

"So it works out, Chubuk, that I've put it all on ... that I'm not a Red?" I asked in a shaking voice. "But that's not true — I always go scouting with you, and I came to the front to defend — so it means, it works out...."

"Nitwit! What works out? I'm telling you that it's circumstances, and all you can say is 'of myself, of myself.' Now say you'd been sent to a cadet corps. You'd have turned out to be another Kaledin cadet, that's all."

"And if you'd been sent?"

"Me?" Chubuk snorted. "I've got twenty

years of work in the mines behind me. No cadets' school can knock that out of a man."

My vanity was deeply wounded. Chubuk's words had stung me to the quick. I fell silent. But I could not keep quiet for long.

"Chubuk, but does that mean the detachment doesn't need me if I'm the sort who might have been a cadet, a Kaledin man?"

"Nitwit!" replied Chubuk calmly, as if he were unaware of my anger. "Why shouldn't the detachment want you? What do we care what you might have been? The important thing is what you are now. I'm only telling you this so you don't get swelled-headed. In general, you're not a bad fellow. You've got our kind of blood. Just let us get to know you a little better, and we'll be admitting you into the Party. Ni-itwit!" he added, this time ever so gently.

I knew that Chubuk was fond of me. But did he feel how much I liked him at that moment, much more than anybody else? "Chubuk's a a grand fellow," I said to myself. "He's a Communist, he's worked in a mine for twenty years, his hair is already turning grey, and yet he's always with me. And with nobody else but me. Doesn't that mean I deserve it? And I'll try to be still more deserving. I won't bend down at all when we fight and if I get killed, it won't matter. They'll write Mother that her son was a Commu-

nist and died for the great cause of the revolution. Mother'll cry and hang my picture up on the wall next to Father's, and the new, radiant life will go on as usual within those walls.

"It's too bad the priests lie," I mused on, "and a man hasn't got a soul. If he had a soul, it could see what the new life looks like. It'll probably be a fine, interesting life."

The cart jerked to a stop. Chubuk hastily thrust his hand into his pocket and said softly:

"I think I hear a noise ahead. Give me my rifle."

We led the horse and cart into the brush. I remained by the cart. Chubuk disappeared, but soon returned.

"Keep mum now. There's four mounted Cossacks on the road. Give me the sack — I'll muzzle the horse. It might neigh all of a sudden."

The clatter of horse's hoofs was approaching. As they came nearer the Cossacks slowed their horses down to a walk. The moon peeped through a gap in the clouds and lit up the road. I saw four Cossack fur caps. There was an officer with them; for an instant the gold braid on his shoulder strap sparkled. We waited until the sound of the hoofs receded, and then we continued on our way.

Day was breaking when we came up to the little farmstead.

The creaking of our cart brought out the sleepy beekeeper — a tall, red-headed peasant with a flat chest and angular shoulders that jutted out prominently under his unbuttoned cotton shirt. He led the horse across the yard and opened the back gate. A faint grassy path stretched away into the distance.

"We'll go this way. There's a barn down by the bog where the men'll be quite safe."

It was quiet and cool in the little hay-filled barn. In the farthest corner some sacking had been spread out over the hay; two neatly folded sheepskins lay at the head of the improvised beds in place of pillows. A bucket of water and a birchwood jug of *kvass* stood close at hand.

We carried the wounded men in.

"Are they hungry?" the beekeeper asked. "There's some bread and bacon under the sheepskins. When the wife milks the cow she'll bring in some milk."

It was time for us to go if we were to overtake our men on the other side of the river. Though we had done everything we could for the wounded, we felt ill at ease at having to leave them behind, without help, in unfamiliar, enemy-occupied territory.

Timoshkin divined our thoughts.

"Well, God be with you!" he said, his lips white and cracked. "Thanks, Chubuk, and you

too, kid. Maybe we'll meet again some day — who knows?"

Samarin, who was more tired than the other two, opened his eyes and gave us a friendly nod. Baby Gypsy remained silent. He leaned on his elbows and gravely regarded us with a faint smile.

"Well, so long, boys," Chubuk said. "Get better. The beekeeper's a trustworthy fellow — he'll look after you. Good luck...."

As he turned to go out, Chubuk coughed loudly, and, lowering his eyes, began to knock his pipe against the butt of his rifle.

"Here's wishing you luck and victory, comrades!" Baby Gypsy called out after us in a ringing voice. At the sound of his voice we stopped and looked back. "Here's wishing you victory over all the Whites in the world!" Baby Gypsy added in the same distinct, clear voice. Then he dropped his black head on the soft sheepskin.

### *Chapter Eight*

The sun-kissed sands of the river bank melted away in the rippling water. We did not find our men at the ford.

"They must have gone ahead," Chubuk decided. "But it makes no difference to us."

There's a deserted cottage somewhere nearby where the detachment's supposed to strike camp."

"Let's take a dip, Chubuk," I suggested. "It won't take long. Look, the water's so warm!"

"We can't swim here. The place is too exposed."

"So what?"

"So what? A naked man's no soldier. Anybody with a stick can grab hold of a naked man. If a Cossack comes along and picks up your rifle, where'll you be? A thing like that happened at the Khoper River. Not two men but a whole detachment of forty went in swimming. And five Cossacks swooped down on them and opened fire. Was there a mess! Some were killed, and the rest climbed out on the other side and ran away. They wandered about the forest completely naked. The villages all around were rich ones, full of kulaks, and the men daren't show themselves: the kulaks could tell right away that they were Bolsheviks, because they hadn't any clothes on."

Just the same, I talked him into taking a quick dip in a secluded spot a short distance from the ford. Then, strapping our pants and boots into little bundles and fastening them to the bayonets of our rifles, we waded across the river. After the swim the rifle seemed lighter and the cartridge pouch did not rub my side so much. We

strode briskly along the edge of a woods towards a little cottage. The cottage was deserted; its windowpanes and even the water tank in the stove had been removed. It was obvious that the owners had cleaned the place out thoroughly before leaving it.

Chubuk cautiously crept around the house, his eyes narrowed. Then he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The echo lingered long in the forest, reverberating and gradually growing fainter and fainter, until it was lost in the monotonous rustle of the leaves. There was no reply.

"Mean to say we got ahead of them? I suppose we'll have to wait a bit."

We found a shady spot by a bush not far from the wayside and lay down. It was hot. I rolled my coat up and put it under my head, and then removed my leather pouch for better comfort. The pouch was now worn and faded from so many days on the march and so many nights spent on the damp ground. Inside were a pen-knife, a cake of soap, a needle, a spool of thread and the middle section of Pavlenkov's one-volume encyclopaedia, which I had picked up somewhere.

An encyclopaedia is something you can read and re-read without end — you can never remember all of it anyway. That was why I carried

it around with me. Often, while we were resting or hiding somewhere in a gully or forest, I would take out the crumpled book, open it at random, and begin re-reading the pages in consecutive order. There I found biographies of monks, generals and kings; formulas for lacquers; philosophical terms, information about past wars; the history of Costa Rico, a country I had never heard of before, and next to it instructions for making fertilizer out of the bones of animals. Reading that tattered encyclopaedia from C — where it began — to R — where it abruptly ended — I gleaned much useful and useless information of the most diverse nature.

Several days back, before setting out on sentry duty, I had hastily put a slice of black bread into the pouch which I now found full of crumbs; some of the crumbs had pasted together the pages of my book.

I shook the contents of the pouch onto the grass and wiped the lining with my hand. As I did so, my finger came against a fold.

I turned the pouch to the sun, looked inside, and saw a bit of white paper behind the fold.

I grew curious. Ripping the lining a bit further, I drew out a slim batch of documents. I unfolded one of the papers. At the top of the sheet there was a seal with a gilded double-

headed eagle, beneath which, stamped in letters of gold, was the inscription, "Certificate."

The certificate had been issued to Yuri Vaald, Second Company of the Count Arakcheyev Cadet Corps, and attested to his excellent deportment and diligence, to the successful completion of the year's studies, and his promotion to the next class.

"So that's it," I thought as I recalled the boy in the forest whom I had killed, his black jacket from which the buttons had been cut off, and the collar lining with the letters "C. A. C. C."

A second sheet of paper turned out to be a letter written in French, and bearing a recent date. Although I remembered very little of the French I had learned in school, after poring over the letter for half an hour and guessing where I could not translate, I finally made out that it contained a recommendation and was addressed to a certain Colonel Korenkov with the request that he take a personal interest in Cadet Yuri Vaald.

I wanted to show the papers to Chubuk, but Chubuk was asleep. I did not feel like waking him, for he had not rested since the morning before. I put the papers back into the pouch and began to read my book.

An hour or so passed. A strange, distant sound seeped through the rustling of the wind

and twittering of the birds. I rose and cupped my hand round my ear. The sound of horses' hoofs and voices became more and more distinct.

"Chubuk!" I cried, shaking him. "Get up, Chubuk. Our men are coming!"

"Our men are coming!" Chubuk repeated mechanically, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"That's right. They're almost here. Come on, hurry up!"

"How in heck did I fall asleep?" Chubuk asked in surprise. "I must have dozed right off."

He squinted his sleepy eyes in the sun, slung his rifle over his shoulder and followed me. The voices were quite close now. I jumped out from behind the cottage, threw my cap into the air and yelled a greeting to the approaching comrades.

I did not see where my cap fell, because the next moment I realized that I had made an awful mistake.

"Back!" Chubuk cried in a hoarse, snarling voice.

*Pop — pop — pop.*

Three shots rang out almost simultaneously from the first ranks of the column. An invisible force tore the butt of my rifle out of my hands and shattered it with such ferocity that I barely managed to keep my feet. But the noise and the jolt brought me out of my coma. They were Whites! I ran to Chubuk. Chubuk fired.

For a whole hour we were in danger of being captured, but we finally managed to get away. Long after the voices of our pursuers had receded in the distance, we kept forging ahead, wet and flushed. Our parched throats greedily drank in the moist forest air; we kept stubbing our aching, tortured feet against stumps and small mounds.

"That'll do," said Chubuk, throwing himself on the grass. "We'll rest now. We certainly put our foot in it that time, didn't we, Boris! And all because I fell asleep. When you yelled, 'Our men are coming!' I was still half-asleep. I thought you'd found out who they were, and went right up with you."

At this point I looked at my rifle. The gunstock was a mass of splinters and the magazine was twisted.

I handed the rifle to Chubuk. He examined it and flung it away.

"It's nothing but a stick," he said scornfully. "That's not a rifle — it's a club to stun pigs with. Oh, well. It's a good thing you came out of it alive yourself. Where's your coat? Lose it too? That's just what I did. Some business, eh, brother?"

I wanted to rest some more, to lie there a long time without moving, to take off my boots and unbutton my shirt collar, but we were even more

thirsty than tired, and there was no water anywhere around.

We picked ourselves up and slowly continued on our way. We crossed a field and saw a group of cottages huddled at the foot of a hill. From where we were the little white houses with their brown thatched roofs looked like a cluster of large mushrooms. We did not risk going there. Instead, we walked on and once more found ourselves in a woods.

"Look, a house!" I whispered, stopping and pointing to the corner of a red tin roof.

Afraid that we might walk into an ambush, we cautiously crept up to the high fence surrounding the house. The gate was locked. No dog barked, no hens cackled, no cows stamped in their stalls — all was still, as though every living thing had bated its breath at our approach. We went around the house — there was no other gate.

"Get up on my back," Chubuk ordered, "and take a peep over the fence."

I saw an empty, weed-choked yard and trampled flower beds with a few solitary, crushed dahlias and starry dark-blue pansies.

"Well?" Chubuk asked impatiently. "Get off my back for God's sake. Do you think I'm made of stone?"

"There's nobody in there," I replied, jumping

down. "The front windows are boarded up and the side windows have no frames. You can see with half an eye that the place is deserted. There's a well in the yard, though."

We moved aside a loose board in the fence and squeezed through into the yard. Deep down in the mouldy well gleamed an inky blotch of water, but there was nothing to get it out with. In the shed, among a pile of rubbish, Chubuk found a rusty old pail. We let the pail down, but while we were pulling it up the water leaked out. We stopped the hole with some grass and tried again. The water was clean, but ice-cold, so that we had to drink it in little gulps. We washed our perspiring, dusty faces and went up to the house. The door leading to the verandah was wide open and hung only by its lower hinge. Stepping gingerly over the creaking floor, we went inside.

In the first room stood a broken chair and a cupboard, the doors of which had been shattered with something blunt and heavy. Several empty drawers lay on the floor, which was littered with straw, shreds of paper and rags.

"The peasants ransacked the place," Chubuk said softly. "Took everything of any value and went off."

In the next room we found an untidy pile of dusty books covered over with chalk-stained

sacking. In the center of the pile lay a torn portrait of a stout gentleman, across whose high white forehead someone had inscribed an obscene word with a finger dipped in ink.

It was strange and fascinating to wander from room to room in this deserted, pillaged house. Each detail — a cracked flowerpot, an old photograph, a button glinting in the midst of the rubbish, scattered and trampled chess figures, a King of Spades among the pieces of a shattered Japanese vase — reminded one of people, of inhabitants, of the past — so unlike the present — of the peaceful owners of this house.

There was a soft thud in the next room. The noise, so sudden amid the deathly stillness of the deserted rooms, made us start.

"Who's there?" Chubuk's loud voice rent the silence. He raised his rifle.

A large tawny tomcat glided toward us. He came to a stop two paces away, and glaring at us with his cold green eyes, gave an angry, hungry meow. I wanted to stroke his fur, but he backed away, and in a flash, without even touching the windowsill, leaped through the window onto an overgrown flower bed and disappeared in the grass.

"How'd he ever keep alive?"

"That's easy. He lives on mice, and from the smell of it there's hordes of them here."

A distant door creaked with heart-gripping despondency. Something shuffled unhurriedly across the floor: it sounded as though the floor were being wiped with a dry rag. We glanced at each other. Those were a man's footsteps.

"Who the hell's coming here now?" Chubuk said softly, pushing me into a corner and noiselessly releasing the safety catch of his rifle.

A faint cough, a crumpled ball of paper crackled as it was moved aside by the opening door, and in walked a small, unshaven old man in threadbare blue pyjamas and bedroom slippers on his bare feet. The old man looked at us in surprise but without fear and greeted us politely.

"I heard something moving about downstairs," he said casually. "Thought maybe the peasants had come. I looked out of the window, but couldn't see any carts."

"Who are you?" Chubuk asked curiously, slinging his rifle over his shoulder.

"First allow me to ask you who you are," the old man said in the same low, casual voice. "For if you have deemed it necessary to pay me a visit, then please introduce yourselves to the master of the house. However..." he cocked his head slightly and slid his filmy grey eyes over Chubuk, "I can guess that you are Reds."

The old man's lower lip drooped, as though someone were forcing it down. A gold tooth gleamed yellow, and his eyelashes flickered, sweeping the film from his grey eyes. He swung his arm in the broad gesture of a hospitable host and invited us to follow him.

"Please come this way."

We glanced at each other in amazement and followed him through the looted rooms. He ushered us out to a narrow wooden staircase leading to the second floor.

"You see, I receive my guests upstairs," he said in an apologetic tone. "Downstairs everything is so untidy and disorderly, and there's no one to put things straight. Everybody seems to have vanished; I can't get hold of a single soul. This way, please."

We found ourselves in a small sunlit room. A dilapidated old sofa stood against a wall. A sackcloth did service as a sheet, and the remains of a lovely but badly singed rug replaced the blanket. There was also a three-legged writing table, over which hung a canary's cage. The canary had obviously died long ago; it was lying in the feeding-trough with its feet in the air. Several dusty photographs looked down at us from the walls. It was clear that someone had helped the old man bring up what had remained of his battered possessions and furnish the room.

"Please be seated," said our host, waving us to the sofa. "I live quite alone, you know. Haven't had any guests for a long time. The peasants drop in now and again with food, but I haven't seen a decent person in ages. Captain Schwartz came down here once. Perhaps you know him? Oh, pardon me, I'd forgotten you were Reds."

The old man rummaged in his cupboard and brought out two chipped plates, two forks, one of which was a kitchen fork with a wooden handle, and the other a fancy fork with one prong missing, a loaf of black bread and half a round of Ukrainian sausage.

Placing a greasy, soot-stained teapot on a lopsided kerosene stove, he wiped his hands on a towel that had not been washed for God knows how long. Then he took down from the wall a queer pipe with a bowl which was carved into the semblance of a goat with a human face distorted by a toothless grin. He filled the pipe and sat down on a decrepit armchair with squeaking springs. During all of these preparations we sat on the sofa in silence.

Chubuk nudged me and gave a sly smile, tapping his forehead furtively with his finger.

I smiled back.

"It's a long time since I've seen any Reds," our host said. Then he asked, "How is Lenin?"

"Quite well, thank you," Chubuk replied gravely.

"Hm, he's well, you say...."

The old man stirred the tobacco coals in his pipe with a wire and sighed.

"And why shouldn't he be, come to think of it?" He fell silent, and then, as if in answer to our unspoken question, said:

"But I've been ailing a bit lately, you know. Can't sleep at night. Seem to have lost my former mental equilibrium. Sometimes I get up and walk the rooms, and the only sound I hear is the scratching of mice."

"What are you writing?" I asked him. I had noticed on the desk a stack of sheets covered with writing in a very small hand.

"Oh, nothing much," he replied. "A few reflections on current events. I'm drawing up a plan of world reconstruction. You see, I'm a philosopher and take a calm view of passing events. I have nothing to complain about — no, nothing at all to complain about."

The old man got up, glanced out of the window, and sat down again.

"Life will blare and thunder away, but truth will remain. Yes, it will remain," the old man repeated, growing slightly excited. "There were upheavals before this. There was the Pugachev affair, that business of 1905, the same pillaging

and burning of estates. Time passed, and like the Phoenix bird that rose from its ashes, the ruins were restored and all that was scattered was gathered together again."

"Eh, what? You want to turn everything back the way it was, is that it?" Chubuk asked in a gruff, guarded tone. "We'll show you how to turn it back!"

The old man squirmed under the direct question.

"Oh, no, not at all," he said with a fawning smile. "I don't mean that. Captain Schwartz wants that, not I. He offered to return everything the peasants took but I refused. 'What do I want the stuff for?' I said. 'This is not the time to bother about that. Just let them bring me a little food and they're welcome to my things.'"

The old man got up again, stood at the window a few moments, then quickly returned to the table.

"Goodness, what am I thinking about! The teapot's boiling. Move up to the table and have something to eat."

We needed no coaxing. Our teeth crunched on the crusty bread, and the appetizing smell of garlic sausage tickled our nostrils.

Our host went into the next room and was soon heard opening and closing drawers.

"Funny old coot," I whispered.

"Funny is right," Chubuk agreed in an undertone. "Only why does he keep looking out of the window so often?"

Chubuk turned around and inspected the room carefully. His attention was drawn to an old sackcloth spread on the floor in one of the corners. He frowned and went up to the window.

Our host re-entered wiping a dusty bottle on the hem of his pyjama jacket.

"There we are," he said, coming to the table. "Try some of this cognac. Captain Schwartz didn't quite finish the bottle on his last visit. Let me pour some into your tea. I'm fond of it myself, but I'd rather my guests, my guests...." The old man pulled out the paper stopper and poured some of the liquid into our tea. Just as I reached for my glass Chubuk quickly stepped back from the window and said in an angry voice:

"What are you doing, pal? Can't you see there aren't enough glasses? Give the old man your seat instead of sitting there as if you owned the place. You can have your tea afterwards. Sit down, old man. We'll drink this one together."

I stared at Chubuk, wondering why he had spoken to me so rudely.

"No, no!" The old man pushed the glass away. "I'll have mine later on. You're my guests...."

"Go ahead and drink it, Pop," Chubuk repeated, firmly pushing the glass back toward the old man.

"No, no, don't trouble," the old man refused stubbornly. He moved the glass away awkwardly and upset the tea.

I resumed my seat. The old man went to the window and drew the dirty cotton curtains.

"What're you drawing the curtains for?" asked Chubuk.

"The mosquitoes," replied our host. "They just plague the life out of me. This is a low spot, and there's millions of the damned things."

"Do you live here alone?" Chubuk asked suddenly. "You do? Then what's that second bed doing in the corner? Whose is it?" He pointed to the sackcloth.

Chubuk did not wait for an answer but rose from the table, pulled the curtains aside and stuck his head out of the window. I followed suit.

The window afforded a sweeping view of the hills and woods. The road dipped and rose as it spread away into the distance. On the horizon we discerned a few jumping dots against the roseate sky.

"Mosquitoes!" Chubuk snorted. Casting a withering glance at our host's shrinking figure, he added, "You're a mosquito yourself, I see."

Wanted to suck our blood, did you? Come on, Boris!"

At the bottom of the stairs Chubuk stopped, took out his matches, struck one, and threw it onto a pile of rubbish. A crumpled ball of paper took fire, and the flame crept toward the straw on the floor. Another few minutes and the entire room would have been on fire. But with sudden decision Chubuk began to stamp out the flames. Then he pulled me to the door.

"That's not necessary," he said, as though justifying himself. "It'll be ours anyway."

Ten minutes later five horsemen rode past the bushes behind which we were hiding.

"They're headed for that house," said Chubuk. "When I saw the sacking in the corner, I figured right away that the old man didn't live by himself. Did you notice how often he went up to the window? While we were walking through the rooms downstairs he must have sent someone off for the Whites. And that tea, too. I got suspicious when he started pouring out the cognac. What if he'd put rat poison in it? I don't like landowners who turn out to be hospitable after they're robbed, and you can't make me trust them, either. No matter who he pretends to be, he's my biggest enemy."

We spent the night in a lean-to near a haystack. During the night a wind blew up and

it began to rain in torrents. But we were glad: the lean-to did not leak, and no one would disturb our sleep in such weather. Chubuk woke me at dawn.

"Now we'll have to take turns keeping watch," he said. "I've been sitting up for a long time. You keep watch while I take a nap. Somebody might pop up any moment. See you don't fall asleep."

"I won't fall asleep, Chubuk."

I poked my head out of the lean-to. At the foot of the hill I saw a river cloaked in mist. The evening before Chubuk and I had waded waist-deep through a bog, and we were still covered with a sticky layer of mud.

"Gee, wouldn't it be great to take a swim!" I thought. "The river's right by — a couple of hops and skips down the hill."

I sat for half an hour watching over Chubuk, but I could not shake off the desire for a dip. "Nobody's around," I thought. "Who'd think of coming out at this early hour? And there's no one in sight anyway. I'd be back before Chubuk turns over on his other side."

The temptation was too great — my body itched and burned. I unbuckled my useless cartridge belt and ran down the hill.

The river turned out to be farther off than I thought; it took me all of ten minutes to get to

the bank. I threw off my student tunic — the one in which I had run away from home — and my leather pouch, pulled off my boots and pants, and dived into the river. The icy water gave me a shock at first, but I warmed up after splashing about a bit. How good the water was! I swam out to the middle, where there was a shoal with a bush on it. There was something under the bush, a rag, or perhaps a shirt that had drifted downstream. I climbed out, peered into the bush, and jumped back. A man was lying there on his stomach. What I had seen was a piece of his trousers that had got caught on a twig. His shirt was torn and there was a large gaping wound on his spine. I swam back with quick strokes, as though pursued by a wild beast.

As I dressed I turned my head away with a shudder from the bush which stood out green on the shoal. Perhaps the current had become swifter, or I had unwittingly unhooked the man's trousers from the bush, but the corpse had floated out and was being carried toward my bank.

I hastily pulled my pants on and picked up my tunic, but just then the corpse floated up to my feet.

I gave a wild yell, lurched forward, stumbled and almost fell into the water. I had recognized the murdered man. He was one of the three.

wounded men we had left behind at the beekeeper's place. He was our Baby Gypsy.

"Hey you!" someone behind me shouted. "Come here!"

Three men came toward me. Two of them had rifles. I had nowhere to run — they were in front of me, and behind me was the river.

"Whose boy are you?" one of the men, a tall fellow with a black beard, asked.

I made no reply. I did not know whether they were Reds or Whites.

"I'm asking you whose boy you are!" the man said in a gruffer tone, grabbing me by the arm.

"Why talk to him!" one of his companions said. "Let's take him to the village. They can question him there."

Just then two carts drove up.

"Here, give me your whip!" the black-bearded man called to one of the peasant drivers, who stood timidly by his horse.

"What's that for?" his companion said glumly. "What do you want to whip him for? You take him to the village. They'll take care of him there themselves."

"I'm not going to whip him. I want to tie his arms. He looks as if he'll bolt any minute."

He caught my arms behind my back with a deft movement and pushed me toward the cart.

"Get on!"

The well-fed horses trotted swiftly to a large village whose chimneys gleamed white against the green hill.

Sitting in the cart, I still hoped that my guards belonged to a Red guerilla detachment, and that when they found out who I was, they would let me go.

"Who goes there?" a sentry challenged from behind a bush as we approached the village.

"The village elder," replied the black-bearded man.

"Where've you been?"

"Getting carts from the farmstead."

The horses tore ahead and raced past the sentry. I did not see his face or clothes, for my eyes were rivetted on his shoulders. He wore shoulder straps.

### *Chapter Nine*

There were no soldiers in the street; they were probably still asleep.

We drove up to the village church, in front of which stood several traps, a covered wagon marked with a red cross, a field kitchen, and a few sleepy-eyed cooks who were chipping wood for the fire.

"Take him up to headquarters?" the driver asked the village elder.

"I guess so. Hey, wait — His Honour's still asleep. It isn't worth while disturbing him because of this kid. Put him in the cooler for the time being."

The cart pulled up at a low brick house with barred windows. As I was pushed toward the door the village elder quickly searched me and took away my leather pouch. The door closed behind me and the lock clicked.

At first I felt an almost physical pang of fear. I was sure that my hours were numbered and there was no hope of salvation. The sun would rise a little higher, His Honour would wake up, call for me, and after that there would come death, the end.

I sat down on a bench, leaned my head against the windowsill and sank into a torpor. The pulse in my temple beat like a tiny sledgehammer. One thought kept reverting again and again, like the tune of a cracked phonograph record: the end, the end, the end. . . . Then, after having whirled madly for what seemed ages, the needle of my consciousness was given a soundless push and fell into the correct groove of my brain; my thoughts became coherent and sped on in swift succession.

"Can't I escape somehow? What a senseless way to get caught! Perhaps I can get away, after all? No, that's impossible. But perhaps the Reds are advancing on the village and will free me in time? But what if they don't? Or what if they come too late? Or perhaps. . . . No, there isn't any perhaps — nothing will come of it all."

Just then a herd was driven past the window. The sheep passed by in close ranks, bleating and tinkling their bells. The herder cracked his whip. A little calf capered along, trying to catch hold of its mother's udder.

This peaceful rustic scene threw my plight into sharper relief. A furious resentment overcame me. For a moment it even drowned out my terror: a morning like this, with everything so alive, even the sheep, and life going on all around, and I've got to die!

Then, as it frequently happens, out of the chaos of jumbled thoughts and crazy, impossible plans, rose one that was altogether simple and clear, a plan, it would seem, that should have been first to come to my aid.

I had become so accustomed to thinking of myself as a Red Army man, a combatant in a proletarian detachment, that I had assumed this needed no proof, that it was indisputable, that to prove or disprove it would have been as silly as trying to explain to someone that my hair

was blond and not black, which was perfectly obvious.

"But wait a minute," I said to myself, grasping eagerly at a happy thought. "All right, I'm a Red. I know about it. But what is there about me to tell *them* that I am?"

I followed this train of thought to the conclusion that there was nothing to give me away. I had no Red Army papers on me. I had lost my grey, star-embellished fur hat during my flight from the cottage. My army greatcoat was lost at the same time. My shattered rifle was lying somewhere in the woods, and I had left my cartridge belt in the lean-to before taking that dip in the river. My tunic was black, a part of my school uniform. I was not of military age. What else was there to reveal my identity?"

Oh, yes! The little Mauser in my lining pocket. And what else? The story about how I had come to be on the bank of the river. The Mauser I could shove under the stove, and as to the story — couldn't I make one up?

"To keep things from getting confused," my thoughts ran, "I'll stick to my own name, age and birthplace, I'll be my own self, Boris Gori-kov, a pupil of the fifth class of the Arzamas Polytechnical School. I left with my uncle (I'll recall my real uncle, so that the story will ring true) to visit my aunt in Kharkov (Uncle had the

address). I fell behind on the way and was taken off the train for not having any pass or documents (Uncle had them). I then decided to walk to the next station and take a train there. But here Red territory had ended and White had begun. How did I manage to keep alive all the time? I begged for food in the villages. How come I wanted to go to Kharkov when I didn't have my aunt's address? I thought I'd find it at the address bureau there. And if they say, 'How the hell did you expect to find any address bureaus nowadays?' I'll look surprised and answer that address bureaus do exist — even such a little town as Arzamas has one. And if they ask, 'How could your uncle hope to make his way from Red Russia to White Kharkov?' I'll say that he's the kind of bird who could get across the border, let alone into Kharkov. But me — I'm not that kind of person, I just can't. . . . At this point I'll cry. Not hard, but just to show that I feel bad. That will do for the present. The rest I can make up on the spot."

I drew out my Mauser. First I intended to shove it under the stove, but then I thought better of it. How would I get it back if they should let me go? The room had two windows, one of which faced the street, and the other a narrow alley hemmed in by clumps of nettle. I picked a piece of paper up from the floor, wrapped the

Mauser in it, and threw the little bundle into the thickest part of the nettles. No sooner had I done this than I heard a noise on the porch. Three more men were brought in. Two were peasants who had hidden their horses during a requisitioning of horses and carts, and the third was a boy who had stolen, for no apparent reason, a spare spring from a machine-gun carriage. The boy had been beaten, yet he did not groan; but he was breathing hard, as though they had made him run.

In the meantime the village had begun to bestir itself. Soldiers tramped past, horses neighed, men clattered with their messtins at the field kitchen, telephone men appeared, unrolling their reels of wire. A change of guards marched past, shoulder to shoulder, to the command of a supercilious corporal.

The lock clicked again, and a soldier poked his head through the doorway. He made no attempt to enter, but reached into his pocket for a crumpled sheet of paper and glanced at it.

"Which one of you is Vaald? Come on out!" he shouted.

I looked at my neighbours and they looked at me, but nobody got up.

"Vaald. Well, which one of you is Vaald?"

"Yuri Vaald!" I was aghast. I remembered the papers I had found in the lining of my pouch

and about which I had forgotten in the excitement of the past few hours. I had no alternative. I got up and walked uncertainly to the door.

"Why, of course," I thought. "They found the papers and are taking me for him, for the fellow I killed. How awful! My first plan was such a simple and good one, and now it'll be so easy to put my foot into it! But I can't go back on those papers. They'll become suspicious at once and want to know how I got hold of them, and why."

My carefully invented story about visiting my aunt with that old bird of an uncle dropped completely out of my head. I had to think of something new, but what? I would have to do my thinking on the spot.

"God, but how foolish I am! I'm Vaald now, ain't I? Being led to people on my side. I ought to be happy and satisfied, but here I'm slouching along as though I were following a hearse."

I straightened up and forced a smile. How difficult it was to be gay sometimes! Try smiling when your lips feel as though they are being sucked in!

A tall, elderly officer with the insignia of a captain came down the steps of headquarters. At his side strode the village elder, looking like a dog that has just been kicked. Catching sight of me, the village elder stopped and spread out his

arms, as much as to say, "Pardon me, but there was a slight misunderstanding."

The officer said something sharply to the village elder, who nodded obsequiously and ran off.

"How do, prisoner of war," the captain said a little mockingly, but without a trace of anger.

"I wish you health, sir!" I replied, as I had been taught during military drill at school.

"You're free," the captain said to my escort. He shook my hand. "How did you turn up here?" he asked with a sly smile, reaching for a cigarette. "Want to defend your country? I read the letter to Colonel Korenkov, but it won't do you any good now because the colonel was killed a month ago."

"Damn good thing too," I thought.

"Come along to my place. Why didn't you tell the village elder who you were, my boy? You wouldn't have had to sit in the cooler. Fancy getting back to your own people and landing first thing in the cooler!"

"I didn't know who he was. He wasn't wearing any insignia and looked just like any other peasant. I thought he might be a Red; they say there's quite a few of them knocking about these parts," I managed to squeeze out, thinking at the same time that the officer was not so bad: he was pretty unobservant if he could not see from my

stiff attitude that I was not the person he was taking me for.

"I knew your father," said the captain. "A long time ago in 1907, during the maneuvres in Ozerki, I visited your family. You were a little whippersnapper then; there's just the slightest resemblance left. Do you remember me?"

"No," I replied apologetically. "I'm afraid I don't. I remember the maneuvres a little, but there was an awful lot of officers around at the time."

If not for that "slightest resemblance" of which the officer spoke, and if he had had the slightest suspicion about my identity, he could have put me in the soup with two or three questions about my father and the cadet corps.

But he suspected nothing. The fact that I had not revealed myself to the village elder seemed to him natural enough, and hordes of cadet corps students were fleeing to the Don those days.

"You must be hungry. Pakhomov!" he called to a soldier who was busy with a samovar. "What have you got there?"

"A chicken, Your Honour. The samovar'll be boiling in a moment. The priest's wife has just put up some dough, so we'll have biscuits soon."

"A chicken! What's one little chicken for the two of us? Bring us something besides!"

"How about goose fats, Your Honour? And I can warm up yesterday's cheese dumplings."

"Let's have the dumplings and the chicken, only be quick about it!"

A telephone rang in the next room.

"Your Honour, Captain Schwartz is on the phone."

The captain spoke his instructions into the telephone in a smooth, confident baritone.

When he had replaced the receiver, one of his fellow-officers asked him:

"What news has Schwartz got about Begichev's detachment?"

"None, so far. Two Reds wandered into Kustarev's house yesterday, but our men failed to catch them. Oh, yes! Victor Ilyich, please draw up a report to the effect that according to intelligence information received by Schwartz, Shebalov's detachment will try to skip past Colonel Zhikharev into the Red district. We must not give them a chance to join Begichev."

Then, turning to me, he said:

"Well, young man, let's have breakfast. When you've eaten and rested we'll decide what to do with you."

No sooner had we sat down to the table than the orderly brought steaming dumplings on an earthen plate, a chicken the size of a full-grown cock, and a sizzling pan of goose fats. As I

reached out for a wooden spoon, thinking to myself that fate was being pretty kind to me, the sound of raised voices came from the gate outside.

"Someone to see you," said the orderly. "They've caught an armed Red. Found him in a lean-to on Zabelenny Meadow. The machine gunners went out there to mow hay and found him asleep with a rifle and a grenade by his side. So they fell on him and bound him hand and foot. Shall I let them in?"

"Bring them in, but not here. Let them wait in the next room until I've finished my breakfast."

Once more I heard loud footsteps and rifle butts banging against each other.

"In here!" someone shouted in the next room. "Sit down on this bench. And take your hat off — can't you see there's icons here?"

"Untie my hands before you start yapping your head off."

My mouth opened in horror, and the dumpling I had just put in it fell back on the plate. That prisoner was Chubuk!

"Burn your tongue?" the captain asked. "Don't hurry so. There's plenty of time."

The anguish I experienced was indescribable, yet I had to appear happy and gay so as not to rouse suspicion. The dumplings tasted like lumps

of clay. It cost me real physical effort to force them down my throat. But the captain assumed that I was simply ravenous — I had told him as much that very morning — and now I had to make myself eat. I sat there chewing my food with wooden jaws and mechanically poking my fork at the plate, crushed by the realization of my guilt.

"I'm to blame for his being captured by two machine gunners," my thoughts ran. "He warned me, but still I went off to take a swim without telling him. I'm to blame for the fact that my best comrade, the dearest man I know, was caught in his sleep and taken to enemy headquarters."

"Ho, there, brother!" The captain's voice, coming as though from afar, broke in on my thoughts. "I see you're just about asleep on your feet. The fork's in your mouth and your eyes are closed. Go lay down on the hay and rest. Pakhomov, show him the way!"

I stood up and walked to the door. Now I would have to pass through the room where Chubuk was sitting.

It was an excruciating moment.

I had to see that the surprised Chubuk did not give me away by a single movement or exclamation. I had to let him know that I would do everything I could to save him.

Chubuk sat on the bench with lowered head. I coughed. Chubuk raised his head and fell back, but before he touched the wall he controlled himself and choked the exclamation that had been ready to burst from his lips. Pretending that I was holding back a cough, I put my finger to my lips. From the way Chubuk winked at me and then glanced at the orderly accompanying me, I saw that Chubuk had understood nothing; he thought I had been arrested on suspicion and was trying to prove my innocence. His encouraging glance told me: "It's okay, don't be afraid. I won't give you away."

This mute sign-language had been communicated so rapidly that neither the orderly nor Chubuk's escort noticed anything untoward. I staggered out into the yard.

"Over there," the orderly pointed to a small shed adjoining the house, "you'll find hay and a blanket. Only close the door behind you if you don't want the pigs running in."

### *Chapter Ten*

I buried my head in the leather cushion and lay very still. "What shall I do now? How can I save Chubuk? What must I do to help him get away? I'm to blame and I've got to get him out

of this mess, but I've done nothing but sit and eat dumplings, while he'll have to pay for my mistake."

But I could think of nothing.

My head grew warm, my cheeks burned and gradually I fell into a state of feverish agitation. "Am I behaving honourably? Oughtn't I to go out and announce that I'm a Red, too, that I'm Chubuk's comrade, and that I want to share his fate?" The simplicity and loftiness of this thought dazzled me. "Of course," I whispered to myself, "it would at least be a way of atoning for my blunder." At this point I remembered a story I had read long ago about a boy during the French Revolution who had been let off on his word of honour and had returned to be shot. "That's the idea," I hurried to convince myself. "I'll get up now, go out and tell them. Let the soldiers and the captain see how the Reds can die. And when they put me up against the wall, I'll shout, 'Long live the Revolution!' No — not that. That's what everybody shouts. I'll shout, 'Three curses on the hangmen!' No, I'll say...."

I grew more and more excited by the grim solemnity of my decision and gradually worked myself up to a state where the reason for one's behaviour begins to lose its actual significance.

"Well, here goes." I sat up on the hay. "So what'll I cry out after all?"

My thoughts began to whirl like a gaudy, dazzling, merry-go-round. Scraps of ridiculous, empty phrases flashed through my mind, and instead of thinking of my last words, I suddenly recalled an old Gypsy who used to play the flute at weddings in Arzamas, and a great many other things which had no bearing at all on my present situation.

"Here goes," I told myself. But the hay and blanket seemed to bind my feet like quicksand.

I understood then why I could not get up. I did not want to get up, and all my thoughts about last words and about the Gypsy were just an attempt to stave off the decisive moment. Regardless of what I was saying or how I was trying to work myself up, one thing was clear: I did not want to give myself up and be put against a wall. Having admitted as much to myself, I lay down again, subdued, and wept noiseless tears at my despicable paltriness, comparing myself to the great boy of that long-past French Revolution.

The wooden wall against which the hay was piled shook. Somebody on the other side had scraped a heavy object against it — a rifle butt or the corner of a bench. Then I heard voices.

I crept up to the wall like a lizard and pressed my ear against the boards. I caught the end of what the captain was saying:

"... So it's no use beating about the bush. You'll only make things worse for yourself. How many machine guns in your detachment?"

"Things couldn't be any worse anyway, and I've got nothing to hide."

"I'm asking you how many machine guns you've got."

"Three — two Maxims and a Colt."

"He's fooling them," I thought. "There's only one Colt in the whole outfit."

"How many Communists have you got?"

"Everybody's a Communist."

"Is that so? What about you?"

There was no reply.

"Are you a Communist too? I'm talking to you!"

"Why ask. Aren't you holding the card in your hand?"

"S-i-i-lence! I see you're one of those political-minded guys. Stand straight when an officer speaks to you. Were you in that house?"

"Yes."

"Who were you with?"

"A comrade of mine. A little Jew."

"A kike? Where's he gone to?"

"He ran away — in the other direction."

"Which direction?"

"The opposite direction."

I heard a thud and the sound of a stool being moved. Then the baritone drawled:

"I'll show you the opposite direction! I'll send you in the opposite direction myself in a moment!"

"Why don't you hurry up and put an end to the show instead of beating me?" Chubuk said in a quieter voice. "If our men caught you, Your Honour, they'd give you a couple of socks on the jaw and then finish you right off. You've gone and marked me all up with your whip, and you call yourself an intellectual."

"Wha-a-at? What was that you said?" the captain spluttered.

"I say you oughtn't keep a guy waiting for nothing."

Another voice suddenly put in:

"You're wanted on the phone, sir."

For the next ten minutes it was quiet on the other side of the wall. Then orderly Pakhomov called from the porch:

"Corporal! Musabekov! Ibrahim!"

"Eh?" came the lazy reply from a clump of raspberry bushes.

"Where the hell are you? Go and saddle the captain's horse!"

"Victor Ilyich!" came the baritone again. "I'm going to headquarters. I'll most likely be back at night. Ring up Schwartz and tell him to

get in touch with Zhikharev right away. Zhikharev reports that Begichev's and Shebalov's detachments have joined up near the confluence of the rivers."

"What'll I do with this fellow?"

"Shoot him. No — better hold him until I get back. I'll have another chat with him. Pakhomov," he continued, raising his voice. "Is the horse ready? Give me my binoculars. Another thing: when that boy wakes up, give him something to eat. Don't keep any dinner for me; I'll have mine over there."

The black fur caps of the orderlies flitted past the gap in the boards. The horses' hoofs clumped softly along the dusty road.

Peering through the same gap, I saw Chubuk being led out to the building in which I had been locked up that morning.

"The captain will return late," I thought. "Which means that Chubuk will be brought out for interrogation at night."

A faint hope stirred in my breast. I felt as if a cool breeze were fanning my brow.

"I'm free. Nobody suspects me. Besides, I'm the captain's guest. I'm free to go wherever I like. When it begins to grow dark I'll take a walk down that little alley behind the brick building, find my Mauser and shove it through the window bars. The soldiers will come for

Chubuk at night. When they lead him out they'll think he's unarmed, and he can kill both of them before they can say Jack Robinson. The nights are pitch-black now, and he can get away easily. The main thing is to slip him the Mauser. That oughtn't to be so difficult, though. It's a brick building and the bars are strong; the sentry isn't afraid the prisoner might escape through the window. He'll be sitting on the porch and watching the door. He won't take more than an occasional look round the corner."

I went out into the yard and poured a whole bucket of cold water over my head to obliterate the traces of tears. The orderly gave me a glass of *kvass* and asked me whether I wanted my dinner. I declined and strolled out into the street, where I sat down on a bench near the gate.

The black rectangle of the barred window behind which Chubuk was sitting stared at me from the other side of the broad street.

"I wish I could get Chubuk to look out," I thought. "If he saw me here it would cheer him up; he'd understand that since I'm free I'll try to save him. But how to make him look this way? I can't very well shout or wave my hand — the sentry would want to know what's up. Aha! I have it! There's the way I used to call Yashka Tsukkerstein out to the garden!"

I ran back into the house, took a small hand mirror down from the wall and returned to the bench. First I began to examine a pimple that had broken out on my forehead, then I let the sun's reflection play on the roof of the building opposite and slowly brought it down the wall and into the black gap of the window. The sentry could not see the flashes from his seat on the porch. Then, without moving the mirror, I covered and uncovered it with my hand several times.

I had calculated on the prisoner becoming interested in the flashes of light in his dark cell, and so he did. The next moment the beam of my sun flashlight fell upon the silhouette of a man. Flashing it several times so that Chubuk could locate its source, I put away the mirror, stood up, and, as though stretching myself, raised one arm, the military signal for "Attention! Be ready!"

Two slim cadets strode up to the porch of headquarters. Their trench caps were dusty and their carbines hung slantwise over their backs. They asked for the captain. A junior officer who was the captain's deputy came out. The cadets saluted, and one of them produced a packet.

"From Colonel Zhikharev."

Then the telephone began to buzz insistently: the junior officer was trying to get through to regimental headquarters. Four soldiers on liaison

duty dashed out of the house and ran off on the double-quick, each in a different direction. Several minutes later the village gates were thrown open and ten mounted Cossacks clad in black sped off along the road. The swiftness and efficiency with which the staff instructions were executed came as an unpleasant surprise. The trained cadets and the drilled Cossacks of the mixed detachment were unlike our brave, but loud-mouthed, undisciplined men.

The sun was only beginning to set, and I was already impatient. From the preparations being made and scraps of conversations that I managed to catch, I learned that the detachment would take to the road that night. To while away the time until dark and to have a better look around, I walked through the village and out to a pond in which Cossacks were bathing their horses. The horses snorted and squelched their hoofs in the oozy, clayey bottom. The warm, foamy, stagnant water streamed down their sleek sides.

A stripped, bearded Cossack with a cross hanging from his neck was standing on the bank and slashing at a leafy osier willow with his sabre.

Raising the sabre high over his head, the Cossack compressed his lips and expelled a short, quick breath as he brought the blade down on the bush. It sounded just like the puffing of a

butcher when he hacks at a side of beef: *hrumph, hrumph*.

Thick branches fell to the ground like mown grass at a touch of the sharp, glittering blade. That sweeping blade could just as easily lop off a Red Army man's arm or neatly sever his head.

I have seen what a Cossack sabre can do: it is as if the mortal blow is dealt not by a narrow blade from a horse galloping at full speed, but by the meticulously aimed axe of a cold-blooded headsman standing over the block.

At the sound of the church bell ringing for Vespers, the Cossack wiped the hot blade on a piece of grey cloth, slipped it into the scabbard, and, puffing hard, crossed himself.

I walked down a narrow path running through a potato patch and came to a spring. The ice-cold water gurgled merrily over an old, mossy log. The faded eyes of a rusty icon shone dimly from a rotting wooden cross.

Dusk was falling. "Another half hour," I thought, "and I can go back to the brick building." I decided to walk to the outskirts of the village, cross the highway and then follow a path leading up to the barred window. I knew where to find my Mauser. The white wrapping showed faintly through the nettle. I decided to pick it up without stopping, shove it through the window

and continue on my way as if nothing had happened.

Turning a corner, I came upon a group of soldiers in a vacant lot, and before I knew it I was facing the captain.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in surprise. "Do you want to see it too? This sort of thing must still be new to you."

"Are you back already?" I stuttered foolishly, not grasping his meaning.

At the sound of a command we swung round. What I saw made me clutch convulsively at the cuff of the captain's sleeve.

Twenty paces away from us were five soldiers with rifles at the ready. They were facing a man standing against the clay wall of an uninhabited cottage. The man was bareheaded, his hands were bound behind him, and he was staring straight at us.

"Chubuk," I whispered, swaying.

The captain turned to me in surprise and laid his hand soothingly on my shoulder. Without taking his eyes off us and paying no heed to the command, at which the soldiers had raised their rifles, Chubuk straightened up, tossed his head scornfully and spat.

The next instant there was a flash and an ear-splitting report; my head felt as if it had been hit against a big Turkish drum.

I lurched forward and fell to the ground, ripping the strap of the captain's cuff as I did so.

"Cadet," the captain said sternly when I had come to. "What's this? You're acting like a sissy! You had no business coming here if you can't bear the sight of such things. This won't do, my dear boy," he added a little more kindly. "And you ran off to join the army, too."

"He's not used to it," said the lieutenant in command of the firing squad, striking a match and lighting up. "Don't pay any attention to it. There's a telephone operator in my company, a cadet, who used to call his mother in his sleep. But you should see him now! That man was a devil, though," he added, lowering his voice. "He stood there like a sentinel. Didn't move a muscle. And he had the nerve to spit!"

### *Chapter Eleven*

That same night I retrieved my Mauser, pocketed a grenade that I had found in the captain's cart, and bolted.

All night long I stubbornly forged ahead to the north, without stopping or by-passing the dangerous roads. The black shadows cast by the thickets, the deep gullies, the bridges — all the things that had formerly put me on my guard for

an ambush — I now took in my stride, not expecting or believing that there could be anything more horrifying than what had taken place during the last few hours.

As I marched on I tried not to think about anything or to stir up any memories. I now had one desire only: to get to our men as quickly as possible.

From noon to deep twilight the next day I slept as though drugged under a bush in a secluded hollow. At night I continued on my way. From what I had overheard at the White headquarters I knew more or less where to look for the Reds. They should be somewhere near. But until midnight I wandered in vain along paths and country roads. Nobody stopped me anywhere.

The golden, star-spangled, humid night was alive with the incessant chirping of birds, the croaking of frogs and the whining of mosquitoes; amid the rustle of the dense foliage and the perfume of night violets and sedge, it called out like a restless owl.

I was beginning to despair. Where was I to turn, where was I to look for our men? I came out to the foot of a hill covered with large oaks and flung myself down, exhausted, on a glade carpeted with sweet-smelling wild clover. I lay there quite a while, and the longer I thought the more my mistake gnawed at my conscience. It

was at me and not at the officer that Chubuk had spat. Chubuk had not understood. He had known nothing about the cadet's documents; I had forgotten to tell him about them. At first Chubuk had thought I was a prisoner too, but when he saw me sitting on the bench by the roadside and, especially later on, when he saw the captain place his hand so solicitously on my shoulder, he must have thought I had gone over to the Whites and perhaps had even left him behind in the lean-to on purpose. How else could Chubuk have explained the attention accorded me by the White officer? I burned as though my throat were scalded with sulphuric acid when I recalled the last moment and Chubuk spitting at me. And I felt still more bitter at the knowledge that now nothing could be remedied, that there was no one to explain it all to, no one to justify myself before, that Chubuk was no more; I should see him neither that day, nor the next, nor ever again. . . .

I choked with anger at myself, at my irreparable blunder in the lean-to. And there was no one around, no one to talk to, to confide in. All was still but for the piping of birds and the croaking of frogs. I was angry at myself, and now I became seized with fury at the accursed, soul-wracking stillness. Finally I could bear it no longer: enraged, repenting and mortified, I

jumped up with senseless rage, pulled the grenade out of my pocket, jerked the safety catch, and hurled it onto the thick clover and the dewy bluebells of the green meadow.

The grenade exploded with the thunderous crash that I craved, ripping up a crazy echo that startled the stillness as it went rolling and rumbling into the distance.

I set out straight along the edge of the woods.

"Hey, who goes there!" a voice barked out from behind a bush.

"I go there," I replied without stopping.

"Who's 'I?' Look out now or I'll shoot!"

"Go ahead!" I shouted with inexplicable angry defiance, pulling out my Mauser.

"Stop, you fool!" a familiar voice cried out to the first man, whom I could not see. "Vaska, hold on there, you devil! I think that's our Boris!"

I had enough common sense to control myself and keep from shooting one of the men of our detachment, the miner Malygin.

"Where've you come from? We're camped not far away. They sent us here to find out who threw the grenade. Did you?"

"Yes."

"What's the big idea? Look at him — flinging grenades about and kicking up a shindy! You're not drunk, are you?"

I told the comrades everything: how I walked into the Whites, how Chubuk was captured, and how he died, but I said nothing at all about his last derisive action. I also told them all I had heard at the White headquarters: of their plans and their instructions, and that Zhikharev's and Schwartz' detachments intended to pursue us.

"Well," said Shebalov, leaning on his sword, which had become tarnished and scratched during the marches. "Naturally, we feel bad about losing Chubuk. Chubuk was a first-class Red Army man, the best fighter and comrade we had. We all know that. You made a bad blunder, my boy — yes, a very bad one." Shebalov sighed. "But since we can't return the dead anyway, there's nothing more for me to say to you — it wasn't as if you'd done it on purpose. Everybody makes mistakes."

"That's right," chorused several voices.

"And as for what you told us about Zhikharev and their plans, and for hurrying here to let your comrades know about it — for that here's my hand and my hearty thanks!"

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We swerved to the right and under cover of night marched away from the trap Zhikharev had set for us. Skirting the large villages and wiping out small White patrols on the way, the combined

detachments of Shebalov and Begichev emerged a week later at the Povorino Station sector, which was held down by our regular units.

It was then that I became a cavalryman. Fedya Syrtsov approached me during one of our halts and slapped me on the back with his hard little paw.

"Boris," he asked, "did you ever ride horse-back?"

"Yes," I replied. "But it was at my uncle's place in the village, and without a saddle. Why?"

"If you rode without a saddle you can certainly ride with one. Want to join my mounted group?"

"Sure," I replied, looking at Fedya with disbelief.

"Okay, then, you'll take Grishka Burdyukov's place. You can have his horse."

"Where's he?"

"Shebalov threw him out." Fedya swore. "Kicked him out altogether. Grishka tried on a ring while he was searching a priest's house, and forgot to take it off. It was a rotten ring too — he'd have gotten no more than five rubles for it before the war. But try and talk to Shebalov! Threw Grishka out on his ear, the devil! Went and sided with the priest."

I wanted to say that Shebalov was not likely to take a priest's side and that it was more

probable that Grishka Burdyukov had simply stolen the ring. But I felt that Fedya would not like my line of reasoning and might change his mind about letting me join the mounted scouts. I held my peace. I had dreamed of joining the horsemen for such a long time!

We went to see Shebalov. Shebalov was reluctant to release me from the First Company. It was the morose Malygin who suddenly intervened on my part.

"Let him go," he said. "He's a quick young fellow. Besides, he's all by his lonesome without Chubuk. They always went about together, and now he hasn't got a chum."

Shebalov let me go, but not before he had frowned at Fedya and said — whether in earnest or jokingly, I could not tell:

"Look here, Fedya, don't you spoil that boy for me! Stop blinking; I'm dead serious."

In place of a reply Fedya gave me a merry wink, as much as to say, "That's okay, we aren't babies!"

A month later I was already aping Fedya and swaggering around like a born cavalryman. I learned to wear my spurs with ease and spent all my free time fussing over the skinny piebald horse I had inherited from Burdyukov.

Fedya Syrtsov and I became pals, although Fedya was quite unlike Chubuk. If the truth

were known, I felt freer with Fedya than I had with Chubuk. Chubuk had been more like a father than a comrade. When he scolded or shamed me, I used to stand in front of him and fume, but I never dared talk back to him. With Fedya, however, I could quarrel and make up easily, and it was always fun to be with him — even during the hardest of times. He was very wayward, though. If he wanted to have his own way, nothing could stop him.

### *Chapter Twelve*

One day Shebalov called Fedya over.

"Saddle your horses," he told him, "and take a run over to the village of Vyselki. The Second Regiment called up and asked us to see whether there are any Whites in the village. We haven't enough telephone wire to establish direct contact with them, so we have to talk through Kostyrev. Now they're thinking of running the line through Vyselki, if it's safe."

Fedya did not cotton to the idea. It was raining, and there were eight kilometres of marshland to negotiate to get to Vyselki. He could not hope to get back before night, slogging through all that mud.

"Who's at Vyselki anyway?" Fedya demanded

indignantly. "Why should Whites be there? Vyselki's out of the way altogether, and there's nothing but marshes all around. If the Whites wanted to bother us, they'd keep to the highway instead of going to Vyselki."

"I'm not asking you to go, I'm *telling* you — and get a move on!" Shebalov broke in.

"You don't say! Maybe you'll be telling me to go look for the devil's grandmother next! Think I'd listen to you? Let the infantrymen go. I've got to reshoe the horses. Besides, I told the vet to steam two bucketfuls of tobacco to smear the horses with for the mange, and you're telling me to go to Vyselki!"

"Fyodor," Shebalov said in a tired voice, "say or do what you like, but I won't change my order."

Cursing and spitting as he splashed through the mud, Fedya called to us to get ready to set out.

Nobody wanted to ride all the way to Vyselki through mud and rain for a handful of telephone men. The scouts cursed Shebalov, called the telephone men hogs and bullies, sluggishly saddled their dripping horses and sluggishly rode out of the village. Nobody sang.

The creamy, sticky mud squelched under the horses' hoofs. We proceeded at a walk. An hour later, when we were only halfway there, the rain

began to come down in torrents. Our coats sagged and we were blinded by the water streaming from our hats. Thus we arrived at a fork in the road. Half a kilometre to our right, on a sandy hill, stood a little hamlet of five or six farms. Fedya came to a stop, thought for a few moments, and then jerked his right-hand rein.

"We'll warm up a bit before going on," he said. "Can't even take a smoke in this rain."

We trooped into a large cottage, which was warm and clean and gave off an appetizing smell of roast goose or pork.

"Oho!" Fedya whispered softly, sniffing the air. "It looks like this farm hasn't been baptized yet!"

The host was a hospitable old fellow. He winked at a plump girl, who cast a twinkling glance at Fedya, set some wooden bowls and spoons on the table and drew up a stool.

"What are you standing there for? Sit down," she invited with a smile.

"Is it far to Vyselki?" Fedya asked the host.

"In summer, when it's dry," replied the old man, "we take the short cut through the marshes. It's nearer that way; only a half-hour walk. But you can't get through the place now — you'd be sucked in in no time. And it's a two-hour ride along the road you were on. The road's pretty bad too, especially at the bridge over the creek. A horse can manage it more or less, but a cart'd

get stuck. My son-in-law came back from there today. Broke his shafts on the way."

"He came today, you say?"

"Yes, in the morning."

"Did he see any Whites there?"

"No, none so far."

"Damn Shebalov anyway! I told him there weren't any Whites there. If there weren't any in the morning, then there aren't any now, either. Who the hell would go there on a day like this? Let's take our coats off, boys. No damn good going on — we'll only sprain the horses' legs."

"Think it'll be okay, Fedya?" I asked. "What'll Shebalov say?"

"Shebalov?" said Fedya, resolutely throwing off his heavy, mud-spattered coat. "We'll tell him we were there and didn't see any Whites."

A bottle of home-made brew appeared on the table during dinner. Fedya poured out drinks, including a cup for me.

"Drink it," he said, clinking cups. "Let's drink to the world proletariat and the Spanish revolution! May God send us enough revolutions to last us while we live, and enough Whites to kill! God give them good health — at least there's somebody to hack at. It'd be pretty dull without them in the world. Bottoms up!"

Fedya saw me holding my cup uncertainly. He gave a long whistle.

"Phe'w! What's the matter with you, Boris? Didn't you ever drink before? You're a little sissy, not a cavalryman!"

"Sure I did," I lied, blushing furiously. I drained the cup in one gulp.

The strong-smelling liquid scalded my throat and went to my nose. I lowered my head and bit furiously into a soggy pickle. Soon I felt gay. Fedya pulled his accordion out of its leather case and played something that warmed the cockles of my heart. Then we drank again and again: to the health of the Red Army men who were fighting the Whites, to our trusty horses which bore us into mortal battle, to the sharpness and accuracy of our sabres, so that they mercilessly sliced off the heads of the Whites, and to many other things.

Fedya drank the most, but was the least drunk. His black curls straggled over his moist forehead as he pulled vehemently at his accordion and sang in a pleasant tenor:

*"O'er the river, o'er the Don,  
There the Reds are roaming. . . ."*

We caught up the refrain in a discordant, rowdy chorus:

*"Ho! Ho! Off they go!"*

Then Fedya again took up the song, rocking his head and screwing up his filmy eyes:

*"The sword, the vixen, whips their heels,  
Sharper than a sickle...."*

And we joined in boisterously:

*"Sharper than a sickle....  
Hey! Hey! Gone today!  
Life is worth a pickle!"*

Fedya rounded off the tune on such a high note that he drowned out all our voices and his own accordion. He dropped his head and fell into a reverie, then tossed his curls violently as though a bee had stung him in the neck, brought his fist down on the table and reached once more for his cup.

We left late in the evening, in a drizzle. It took me some time to put my foot in the stirrup, and when I finally hoisted myself up into the saddle I felt as though I were sitting on a swing. My head spun. The horses were fractious, and our ranks became disorderly. I swayed in my saddle for a long time. Finally I dropped my head on the horse's mane.

The next morning I woke up with a hangover and went out into the yard, feeling bad about the happenings of the day before. There was no oats in my horse's bag: on returning the

evening before I had spilt it on the ground. Fedya's horse, on the other hand, had a bag brimming with oats. I picked up a small bucket and scooped some out for my horse. In the doorway I bumped into two of our scouts. Both of them were disgruntled; their eyes were bloodshot and bleary.

"Do I look like that?" I thought with alarm. I went into the house and washed myself. I washed for a long time. Then I went out again. There had been a slight frost during the night and the first snowflakes of the season were sprinkling the hardened churned-up road. Fedya Syrtsov came running up to me.

"Who the devil gave you permission to take my oats?" he yelled. "I'll beat you up for tricks like that!"

"You'll get as much back," I snapped. "Want your horse to bust, do you? Who let you pour an extra portion for yourself, huh?"

"None of your business!" Fedya sputtered. Cursing, he leaped at me, swinging his whip.

"Put that whip away, Fedya!" I shouted like one possessed. I was only too aware of what he was capable of doing. "Just dare to touch me and I'll whack you on the head with the flat of my sabre!"

"Oh, yeah?" Fedya was beside himself with rage. I have no idea how our little argument

would have ended if Shebalov had not turned up at that moment.

Fedya both disliked and feared Shebalov. He brought his whip down viciously onto the back of a little dog scampering at our feet, shook his fist at me and strode off,

"Come here," said Shebalov.

I approached him.

"What's the matter with you two? Either you're hugging each other or fighting like dogs. Come into the house."

Shutting the door behind us, Shebalov sat down and asked me:

"Were you with Fedya at Vyselki?"

"Yes," I said, growing uneasy.

"Don't lie to me! None of you were there. Where were you all the time?"

"At Vyselki," I persisted.

Although I was angry at Fedya I did not want to tell on him.

"That's okay, then," said Shebalov. He heaved a sigh. "I'm glad you were there. I had my doubts, you know. I didn't want to ask Fedya because he lies like a trooper. And his men are the same. The Second Regiment called me up and gave me hell. 'We sent telephone men to Vyselki,' they said. 'Believed you, we did, and they came scuttling back!' I told them the Whites must have come in after our men left. But I

couldn't help wondering where Fedya had been. He came back late at night smelling of vodka."

Shebalov fell silent and walked over to the window, beyond which the first timid snow was spreading its fluffy white down over the ground. He pressed his forehead against the steamed pane and stood thus for several moments in silence.

"I'm having the deuce of a time with those scouts," he said presently, turning around. "I admit they're brave all right, but a pretty fractious lot. Fedya too — doesn't know what discipline means. I'd throw him out, only there's no one to take his place." Shebalov glanced at me amiably; his whitish eyebrows lost their frown and from his grey eyes that were always narrowed to give him a stern expression, a shy smile, quite unusual for him, spread over his face in little ripples, like when a pebble is thrown into a pool.

"You know," he said candidly, "it's a pretty hard job commanding a detachment. It's certainly not like making boots. I pore over the maps at night until I begin to see spots. I haven't any general education, let alone a military education, and the Whites are stubborn fellows. It's easy enough for their captains — they've had an education and special military training, but I still

have to spell out the letters of the instructions when I read them. And look at the men I've got! The Whites have discipline — their orders are carried out at once. But our men aren't used to it yet, and I have to check up on every step they make. Other outfits have commissars to help them at least. I've begged and begged for one, but get nothing but refusals. 'You can get along without one meanwhile,' they say. 'You're a Communist yourself.' And what sort of a Communist am I?" Here Shebalov faltered. "I mean, of course I am a Communist, but I haven't got any kind of an education."

The massive Sukharev and Galda the Czech burst into the room at this point.

"I give you soldiers for reconnaissance, soldiers to help the machinegunners and soldiers for kitchen duty. And he doesn't give a single man," the hook-nosed Galda said indignantly, pointing at the beet-red, angry Sukharev.

"He sent men to the kitchen to help peel potatoes," cried Sukharev, "and I relieved my night patrol only at noon! He sent men to the machinegunners, and my boys from the second platoon have been helping the artillerymen repair the bridge since morning. Look here, Shebalov, you can do what you like, but he's got to let you have men for your liaison job. I can't!"

The whitish brows knitted, the cloudy eyes narrowed, and all trace of the shy, good-natured smile vanished from Shebalov's grey, weather-beaten face.

"Look here, Sukharev," he said sternly, leaning on his sword and jangling his knight's spurs furiously, "don't carry on like that. You don't have to make such a fuss because your men lost one night's sleep. You know very well that I want Galda's men to rest because they're due for a special assignment. They're advancing on Novosyolovo tonight."

Sukharev let loose three strings of oaths at no one in particular, while the hook-nosed Galda, mixing Russian words with Czech, gesticulated wildly. I went out.

I was ashamed of myself for having lied to Shebalov. "Shebalov's our commander," I thought. "He doesn't sleep nights and has a hard time of it. And we — look at how we do our duty! Why did I have to lie to him that our scouts were in Vyselki? All we did was get those telephone men into trouble. Thank God nobody was killed. It's not fair, either to the revolution or to our comrades."

I tried to whitewash myself by arguing that Fedya was the chief and that it was he who had ordered us to change our route. I caught myself in time, however, and grew angry. "Did the

chief order me to drink vodka too? Did he order me to fool our commander?"

Fedya's tousled head appeared in a window.

"Boris!" he called softly.

I pretended not to hear.

"Boris!" he repeated in a conciliatory tone.

"Stop grouching. Come in and have some pancakes with us. Come on in. I want to talk to you."

I went inside.

"Eat, kid," said Fedya carelessly, pushing the frying pan towards me and glancing anxiously at my face. "What did Shebalov want to see you about?"

"He asked me about Vyselki. Said we weren't there at all."

"Well, and what did you say?" Fedya began to fidget as though he were sizzling with the pancakes in the frying pan.

"Me? I should have made a clean breast of it. Only I felt sorry for you, you fool."

"Now then, keep your shirt on," Fedya began in an exasperated tone, but remembering that he had not yet pumped everything out of me, he moved up closer and asked anxiously, "And what else did he say?"

"He said we were all cowards and hogs," I lied, staring arrogantly at Fedya. "You were afraid to go to Vyselki," he said, "and must have sat it

out in some gully.' And then he said, 'I've noticed a long time now that you scouts are getting cold feet.' "

"That's a lie!" Fedya flared up. "He didn't say that!"

"Go and ask him," I continued maliciously. " 'I should have sent the infantrymen on a job like that,' he said. 'All the scouts like to do is explore cellars for cream.' "

"You're lying!" Fedya exploded. "What he must have said was, 'The boys have got out of hand — no discipline.' He didn't say a thing about our getting cold feet."

"All right, he didn't," I agreed, satisfied that I had worked Fedya up to a fury. "Maybe he didn't, but do you think it was a nice thing to do? Our comrades trusted us, and what did we do? We got the Second Regiment into trouble because of you, that's what. What will the others think of us now? 'You're a pack of swine,' they'll say. 'Can't be trusted with a thing. You said there were no Whites in Vyselki, but the telephone men who went there with their wire were kicked out of the place before they knew it.' "

"Who kicked them out?" Fedya asked in surprise.

"Who? The Whites, of course."

Fedya flushed. He had not known the trouble he had caused, and now felt uneasy. He

stalked off into the next room without saying a word.

From the way Fedya played the melancholy waltz, *Upon the Hills of Manchuria*, on his accordion, it was evident that he was feeling quite down in the mouth.

He suddenly broke off playing, buckled on his silver-chased Caucasian sabre and went out.

Fifteen minutes later he appeared under the window.

"Get your horse!" he ordered morosely through the pane.

"Where've you been?"

"At Shebalov's. Hurry up!"

A few minutes later our scout group was racing past the field patrol and down the slightly frozen churned-up road.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

At the fork where we had turned off to the hamlet the day before, Fedya reined in his horse and called his two best men aside. He spoke to them a long time, pointing to the road. Finally, after he had cursed both of them so that his instructions would sink in, he rode back to us and gave orders to take the road to the hamlet. There, at the farm, without saying a word about

yesterday's bout, Fedya asked the host about the short cut through the marshes to Vyselki.

"You won't get through, comrades," the old man said. "The horses will be sucked under. It's been raining a week already — a man'd think twice before attempting it on foot, let alone on horseback."

When the two scouts who had been sent ahead returned and reported that Vyselki was occupied by the Whites and that there was a patrol on the road, Fedya disregarded the old man's warnings and ordered him to get ready. The host tried his best to convince him that it was impossible to cross the bog. His wife began to cry, and their daughter, the red-cheeked girl who had winked so gaily at Fedya the day before, snapped at him for tracking up the floor with his boots. But Fedya was adamant. When I asked him about his plans, he did not curse, as I had expected, but looked at me crookedly with a wicked smile.

We soon left the hamlet. Our host rode in front, on his bony nag, by Fedya's side. We turned into a birch grove. The spongy moss oozed muddy water under the horses' hoofs. The road gradually grew worse and the horses sank deeper into the mire. Black islets of mossy mounds jutted up here and there in the flooded meadowland.

We dismounted and proceeded on foot until we came to the old fascine pathway about which our guide had warned us. In front of us stretched a narrow strip of gumbo filled with sticks and decomposing straw.

"Hm," mumbled Fedya, throwing a sidelong glance at his frowning comrades. "Nice little road, ain't it!"

"We'll sink, Fedka!"

"Sure, you'll be sucked under in no time," put in the guide. "The fascines are rotten and full of gaps. It's hard to get across in good weather. And you want to do it in muck like this."

"A horse can't swim or wade through this devil's soup."

"Come on!" Fedya encouraged with a forced smile. "We can take the devil's soup in our stride too!"

He pulled his kicking horse up by the reins and was the first to sink up to the knees in the putrid mud. We straggled along behind him in twos. The water, covered here and there with a film of early morning ice, streamed over into our boots. The slim invisible fascines swayed under our feet. It was terrifying to grope along without knowing whether we would find support underfoot; each minute I felt as though I would trip and be sucked in.

The horses neighed, stalled and jerked.

Fedya's voice called from the thick of the fog, as though from another world:

"Hey you, everybody okay?"

"Well, boys, it looks as if we've reached the end of the trail. We'd better go back," muttered the red-headed bugler through chattering teeth.

Suddenly Fedya emerged from the fog.

"Don't you start a panic here, Pashka," he warned the bugler in a low, angry voice. "If that's the way you feel, you'd better turn around and go back by yourself. Well, Pop," he said, turning to the old man, "my horse is in mud up to its belly. Is it still far to go?"

"Not from here. We'll soon come to a rise, and it'll be dryer going from there on; only we'll have to cross a bad stretch before we get there. If we get across that part, the worst'll be over."

Now the water came to our waists. The old man stopped, took off his hat and crossed himself.

"I'll go ahead and you follow me in single file; it's mighty easy to lose your foothold here."

The old man pulled on his cap and proceeded with small steps, stopping frequently to feel with his stick for the invisible fascines.

Freezing in the raw wind, wet from the waist down and immersed in fog from the waist up, we covered no more than a hundred metres in half an hour. My hands were blue and my knees shook.

"Fedya's the very devil," I thought. "Yesterday he didn't fancy the muddy road, and today he drags us into a bog!"

A low neigh sounded ahead of us. Through a gap in the fog we saw Fedya on a hill, mounted on his horse.

"Quiet now," he whispered when we had grouped round him, wet and shivering. "Vyselki is beyond those bushes, about a hundred paces away. From here on it's dry."

Our frozen cavalry charged into the village with whoops and shrill whistles from a direction the Whites could not have expected us to come. Hurling grenades, we raced up to a little church. At its side stood the cottage housing the White headquarters.

We captured ten prisoners and one machine gun in Vyselki. When, tired but pleased, we set off along the highway for home, Fedya, who was riding by my side, broke out into malicious, gleeful laughter.

"Let Shebalov put that in his pipe and smoke it! Won't he be surprised, though!"

I did not get the point.

"Why does he have to smoke it?" I asked. "He ought to be glad."

"Glad he'll be, but not very. He'll be mad that things worked out my way, and not his."

"How do you mean your way, Fedya?" I asked

with a sinking heart. "Didn't Shebalov send you out?"

"He did, but not to Vyselki. He wanted us to go to Novosyolovo and wait there for Galda, but I took the road to Vyselki. Let him stop crabbing about yesterday. He won't have anything to say to us anyway, since we've captured prisoners and a machine gun."

"That's all very well," I thought, nervously, "but I don't like it. We were supposed to go to Novosyolovo and went to Vyselki instead. It's a good thing our adventure ended like it did. What if we hadn't been able to cross the marsh? Then we certainly would have had nothing to say for ourselves!"

As we approached the village where our detachment was stationed we noticed an unusual animation. Red Army men were hastily deploying along the outskirts. Several horsemen galloped past the vegetable gardens.

Then suddenly a machine gun spoke up from the village. Our red-headed bugler Pashka, the one who had advised us to turn back from the bog, fell to the ground.

"This way!" Fedya yelled, veering his horse round and galloping into a gully.

The machine gun let out a second burst, and the two rear men fell to the ground before they had a chance to take refuge in the gully. One of

the wounded men could not wrench his foot free of the stirrup, and his frightened horse dragged him over the ground.

"Fedya," I muttered, feeling my limbs grow stiff. "What's the matter with you? That's our Colt barking away out there. They weren't expecting us to come from this direction — we were supposed to be in Novosyolovo."

"I'll show them how to bark, dammit!" Fedya snarled, jumping off his horse and running up to the machine gun we had captured from the Whites.

"Fedya, don't! Are you mad! Do you want to kill your own men? They don't know, but you do!"

Fedya, breathing hard, cracked his whip furiously against his chrome-leather boots, swung into his saddle and sped to the crest of a small hill. Several bullets whizzed over his head, but Fedya paid no attention to them. He stood to his full height in his stirrups, fixed his hat to the tip of his sabre and raised it high over his head.

Several more shots rang out from the village, and then the firing stopped. The men of our detachment had seen the signs made by the lone horseman standing under the flying bullets.

Then, waving his hand at us to indicate that we should wait, Fedya spurred his horse and galloped off to the village. After a short while we followed him. At the edge of the village we

were met by a stony-faced ashen Shebalov. His eyes had dimmed, his face had sunken, his sword was spattered with mud and his clogged spurs jangled dully. He stopped us and ordered us all to go to our quarters. Then, sweeping his tired eyes over the horsemen, he ordered me to get off my horse and hand over my arms. Without saying a word I dismounted in view of the entire detachment, unbuckled my sabre, and handed it over with my carbine to the frowning, one-eyed Malygin.

The detachment paid dearly for the scouts' daring but arbitrary raid on Vyselki. Aside from the three cavalymen unwittingly shot down by their own machine gun, Galda's Second Company, which had not found Fedya waiting for them in Novosyolovo, had been routed and Galda himself killed. The Red Army men of our detachment were furious at Fedya and demanded that he be arrested and severely punished.

"That's no way of doing things! We've had enough! We won't get anywhere without discipline. This way we'll ruin ourselves and bring our comrades to ruin."

"What's the use of appointing commanders if each man does as he likes?"

That night Shebalov visited me. I told him the whole story and confessed that I had lied to him out of a feeling of comradeship for Fedya

when he had asked me whether we had been in Vyselki. At the same time I swore that I had known nothing about Fedya's arbitrary act in leading us to Vyselki instead of Novosyolovo.

"Look, Boris," said Shebalov. "You've lied to me once already, and the only reason I'm taking your word now and not having you brought up for trial with Fedya is because you're still young. But you'd better take care, my boy, and see you make less blunders of this kind. Your mistake led to Chubuk's death, and because of you scouts the telephone men stumbled on the Whites. We've had enough of your mistakes! I'm not speaking about that devil Fedya, who's caused me more trouble than anything else. And now go back to Sukharev's First Company and take your old place. I made a mistake in letting you join Fedya. Chubuk — why, you could learn things while you were with him! But Fedya's just an unreliable person. And in general, boy, what sort of habit is this of tying up first with one man and then with another? You've got to associate more closely with all the men. When a man's left to himself he's likely to lose his way and stray from the straight and narrow. To tell the truth, you really ought to join the Party, so as to know your place and stop floundering...."

"I'd be only too glad. Do you think I don't want to join the Party? But they won't admit

me," I replied in a low and grieved voice.

"They won't! But you can strive for it, become worthy of it. Why shouldn't they admit you if you turn out to be the right kind of person?"

\*

That same night Fedya climbed through the window of the cottage in which he had been confined, and, taking his horse and four chums with him, galloped away over the winter's first fluffy snow across the front to the south.

### *Chapter Fourteen*

The Reds had gone over to the offensive along the entire front.

Our detachment was subordinated to the brigade commander and held down a small sector on the left flank of the Third Regiment.

There were two weeks of hard marching.

The Cossacks were retreating, fighting back at every village and farm on the way.

All those days I was filled with one desire only: to atone for my guilt before the comrades and to earn the right to be accepted into the Party.

But it was in vain that I volunteered for dangerous scouting missions. In vain, clenching

my teeth and blanching, did I stand up in the lines when many of our men, even the bravest, fired from the knee or lying down.

Nobody let me take his place on reconnaissance; nobody paid any attention to my showy heroism.

"Look here, Gorikov," Sukharev remarked one day. "Cut out those Fedya tricks! There's no need for you to brag before the men. There's braver men than you here, and even they don't go poking their heads up to be shot at."

"Again Fedya's tricks," I thought with unfeigned dismay. "If they'd only give me a job to do. If they'd only tell me, 'You do this and your name will be cleared, you'll be our friend and comrade again.'"

Chubuk was dead. Fedka was with Makhno — and I didn't want him anyway. I did not chum up with anybody in particular. The men looked down at me disapprovingly. Even Malygin, who used to chat with me and sometimes called me over to have tea with him — even he had cooled off toward me....

Once I happened to hear him speaking about me to Shebalov:

"He goes about moping all the time. Is he lonesome for Fedya? When Chubuk died because of him he wasn't lonesome for long, was he?"

The blood rushed to my face.

It was true that I had soon adapted myself to the idea of Chubuk's death. But it was not true that I was lonesome for Fedya. I hated him.

I heard Shebalov's spurs jangle as he paced the earthen floor. He did not reply at once.

"I don't think you're right, Malygin! No — the boy's not spoilt. He can still be made to see the right way. You're forty, Malygin, and you can't be remade, but he's only going on for sixteen. . . . You and I are worn-out boots, all nailed up, but he's like the uppers: they'll take the shape of whatever lasts you stretch them over. Sukharev was telling me he has Fedya's ways of doing things — likes to jump up in the line and make a show of bravery. And I told him, 'You may have a long beard, Sukharev, but you're as blind as a bat. Those aren't Fedya's ways, it's just that the boy wants to make amends but doesn't know how.' "

At this point Shebalov was called to the window by a horseman, and the conversation was broken off.

I felt much better after that.

I had gone off to fight for the "radiant kingdom of Socialism." This kingdom was somewhere far away; to reach it I had to trudge many a thorny path and overcome many a difficult obstacle. The chief obstacle were the Whites. When I joined the army I could not hate them as

much as the miner Malygin did, or Shebalov, or dozens of others who were not only fighting for the future but were settling accounts for their miserable past. But now it was different. Now the atmosphere of hatred, the stories of the past, about which I had known nothing, and the unavenged injuries that had accumulated through the centuries had gradually set me afire, as the smouldering coals make red-hot a nail that is thrown onto the ashes.

And through this deep hatred the distant lights of the "radiant kingdom of Socialism" beckoned with a still brighter glow.

That evening I asked our quartermaster sergeant for a sheet of paper and wrote out a long application for admittance into the Party. I took my application to Shebalov, but he was in conference with our mess sergeant and Company Commander Piskarev, who was replacing Galda.

I sat down on a bench and waited for them to finish their business. It took a long time. While they were conferring, Shebalov looked up at me several times, as though trying to guess why I had come to him.

When Piskarev and the mess sergeant had left, Shebalov took out his notebook, wrote something in it, and called to a messenger to summon Sukharev. Only then did he turn to me.

"Well, what is it?"

"Comrade Shebalov — I've come to you — Comrade Shebalov," I said, approaching his table. A shiver ran up and down my spine.

"I can see that you've come to me," he said in a gentle, understanding tone. "Well, let's have it."

Everything flew out of my head — all the things I had wanted to tell Shebalov before asking him to recommend me; the long explanation with which I had wanted to convince him that although I was to blame for Chubuk's death and although I had deceived him with Fedya, I actually wasn't so bad, and would be better in the future.

I silently handed him my application.

It seemed to me that a faint smile flickered under his whitish eyelashes and passed on to his cracked lips as he studied my long-winded application.

He read only half of it and pushed the sheet away.

I started. I understood his gesture to mean a refusal.

But it was not a refusal that I read on Shebalov's face. His face was calm, a little tired, and the pupils of his cloudy eyes reflected the cross-bars of the frost-patterned window.

"Sit down," he said.

I sat down.

"Well, so you want to join the Party?"

"Yes," I replied in a low but stubborn voice.

It seemed to me that Shebalov was asking for the sole purpose of proving the infeasibility of my wish.

"Very much?"

"Very much," I replied in the same tone, shifting my gaze to the corner, where dusty icons hung. I was quite sure that Shebalov was making fun of me.

"That's fine," he said. Only then did it dawn on me, from the tone of his voice, that he was not laughing at me but smiling affectionately.

He picked up a pencil lying among the bread crumbs scattered over the table, took my application, and wrote his signature and the number of his Party card on it.

Then, swinging round, stool, spurs, sword and all, he said altogether good-naturedly:

"Well, brother, watch your step now. I'm not only your commander now but a sort of Red papa. Don't let me down...."

"No, Comrade Shebalov, I won't let you down," I replied sincerely, grabbing the sheet of paper with undue haste. "I won't let you or any of our comrades down, not for anything!"

"Wait a moment," he stopped me. "How about the second signature? Who else shall we ask to recommend you, eh? Ah! he exclaimed gaily, as Sukharev came in, "you're just in time."

Sukharev took off his hat and shook the snow from it, clumsily wiped his enormous boots on a sackcloth, and, propping his rifle against the wall, asked as he warmed his frost-nipped hands at the hot stove:

"What's up?"

"Business. About the patrols. You'll have to quarter the boys patrolling the cemetery in the church. We can't have them freezing out there. The priest'll be along any moment and we'll fix it up. But now —" Shebalov chuckled slyly and nodded at me. "Tell me, how's the boy making out?"

"How?" Sukharev asked cautiously, with a broad grin on his red, weather-beaten face.

"What sort of a soldier is he? Give me an attestation according to form."

"He's okay as a soldier," Sukharev replied after a few moments' reflection. "Does his duty well. Can't say I've found fault with him. A bit on the rash side, though. And doesn't get along too well with the boys ever since Fedya left. The boys are good and mad at Fedya, blast his hide!"

Sukharev blew his nose and wiped it on the skirt of his coat. His face became still redder as he continued testily:

"I hope a Gaidamak hacks his head off! Sent a commander like Galda to his ruin! He was a grand company commander! D'you think you'll

ever find another C. C. like Galda? Don't try to tell me Piskarev is a C. C. He's a dumbhead, not a C. C. . . . 'You've got to come across with men for liaison,' I told him today. 'I assigned ten extra men yesterday for patrol duty,' and he. . . ."

"Hold on there!" Shebalov interrupted him. "Don't begin that again. Now you're praising Galda, but you two used to fight like cat and dog. What extra ten men are you talking about? Don't try to put anything over me. Anyway, all that can wait. What I want to know now is this. The boy wants to join the Party. Will you recommend him? What are you staring at me for? Didn't you say yourself he was a good soldier and wasn't doing anything wrong? And as for what's happened — well, we can't keep bringing that up forever!"

"That's true enough!" agreed Sukharev, scratching his head and dragging out his words. "Only, the devil knows!"

"The devil knows nothing at all! You're his company commander and a Party member. You should know better than the devil whether one of your men is good enough to be a Communist or not."

"He's not a bad fellow," Sukharev said, "only he likes to show off too much. Tries to run ahead of the line like a fool. But otherwise he's okay."

"Well, you don't want a man to run back-

wards, do you? That isn't anything to worry about. Well, what do you say? Will you sign it or not?"

"I'd sign it; the boy's okay," Sukharev repeated cautiously. "But who else is signing it?"

"I am. Sit down at the table. Here's the application."

"You signed it!" cried Sukharev, grabbing the pencil in his huge paw. "That's fine! Haven't I been telling you all along that the boy's grand, only he wants a little more spanking!"

### *Chapter Fifteen*

The fighting at the approaches to Novokhopersk had been raging for several days. All the reserves of the division had been thrown in, but still the Cossacks held their positions.

On the morning of the fourth day a lull set in.

"Well, men!" cried Shebalov, riding up to the compact line of soldiers spread across the snowless top of a mound. "Today, after dinner, we start a general offensive. The whole division will attack."

Steam rose in clouds from his hoarfrost-silvered steed. His long, heavy sword blazed in the sunshine, and the red crown of his black fur hat stood out bright against the cold snow.

"Well, men," Shebalov reiterated in his ringing voice. "Today's one of those days — an important day. If we beat the Whites back today they'll have nothing to hold on to until they get to Boguchar. Try your best now, and don't disgrace your old man in the eyes of the division!"

"Who's old?" Malygin barked hoarsely as he walked up. "I'm older than you are any day, and I still can pass for a young man."

"You and I are worn-out boots," Shebalov repeated his favourite saying.

"Boris," he called to me amicably, "how old are you?"

"Going on for sixteen, Comrade Shebalov," I replied proudly. "Turned all of fifteen on the twenty-second of this month."

"All of fifteen!" Shebalov mocked with feigned indignation. "I like that! I'm all of forty-six. Hey, Malygin, do you know what being fifteen means? It means, man, he'll see what you and I won't see...."

"We'll have a peep at it from on high," Malygin rasped with morose humour, wrapping a frayed officer's hood around his throat.

Shebalov touched his chilled horse lightly with his spurs and galloped down the line of campfires.

"Boris, come and have some tea. My water —

your sugar!" Vaska Shmakov called out to me, taking his sooty pot off the fire.

"I haven't got any sugar either, Vaska."

"What have you got?"

"I've got some bread, and I can share a few frozen apples."

"Okay, trickle over here with your bread. I haven't got anything at all. Nothing but water!"

"Gorikov!" someone called from another campfire. "Come here!"

I went over to a knot of arguing Red Army men.

"You tell us," said Grishka Cherkasov, a fat, red-headed fellow, whom we had dubbed "Psalter-Reader." "Here, fellows, you listen to what this guy tells you. Did you study geography? All right, then, tell us what comes after this...."

"In which direction? To the south Boguchar comes first."

"And then?"

"And then — then comes Rostov. There's lots of cities down that way! Novorossiisk, Vladikavkaz, Tiflis. Why?"

"Gee, what a lot!" Grishka said, scratching his ear sheepishly. "Looks like we'll have to fight plenty yet.... I heard that Rostov was on the sea. I thought that's where the war would end!"

Grishka looked at the laughing men, slapped his sides and cried in dismay:

"Boys, we'll have to fight a long time yet!"

The talk died down. A horseman rode up to us from the rear. Shebalov galloped over to meet him. The guns on the flank fired two more times....

"First Company, this way!" Sukharev cried out, waving his hand.

Several hours later the deployed men rose from the snowy mounds. Our scattered and bleeding detachment charged ahead in the face of machine guns and cannon, under shrapnel, up to the knees in snow, to deal the last, decisive blow. Just when the forward units were breaking into the outskirts of the town, a bullet hit me in the right side.

I lurched and sat down in the soft, trampled snow. "It's okay," I thought, "it's all right. If I'm conscious, I'm still alive. And if I'm alive, I'll hold out."

The infantrymen flickered like black dots somewhere far ahead.

"It's okay," I thought, holding on to a bush and leaning my head against the branches. "The aid men will soon come and take me away."

The noise on the field subsided, but somewhere on a neighbouring sector the battle was

still raging. A dull rumble came from there; a lone rocket soared up and hung in the sky like a fiery yellow comet.

Trickles of warm blood seeped through my tunic. "What if the litter-bearers don't come and I'll die?" I thought, closing my eyes.

A large black jackdaw alighted on the dirty snow and hopped over to a pile of horse dung lying nearby. Suddenly it turned its head around warily, glanced at me askance, and flew off with a flapping of its wings.

"Jackdaws are not afraid of dead men," I thought. "When I die from loss of blood, it'll come back and fearlessly alight on the ground at my side."

My head grew weak and began to shake slowly, as though with reproach. On the right flank the explosions in the snowdrifts rumbled ever more dully and the rockets soared up ever brighter.

The night sent out a patrol of thousands of stars for me to look at once more. It also sent out a bright moon. "Chubuk was alive, Baby Gypsy was alive, and Polecat was alive," I thought. "And now they're dead. And I'll die too." I remembered Baby Gypsy's words: "Then I went to look for a better life." "And do you think you'll find it?" I had asked. And he had replied: "I couldn't by myself, but all together

I think we should . . . because we want to so badly."

"Yes, yes! All together," I whispered, clutching at this thought. "Absolutely — all together." My eyes closed, and for a long time I thought of something indefinable, but very, very sweet.

"Boris!" I heard someone gasp.

I opened my eyes. Not far from me, hugging the shell-shattered trunk of a young birch, sat Vaska Shmakov.

He had lost his hat, and his eyes were gazing far ahead, through the moist gloom of the deepening twilight, at the lights of a distant station glimmering like gold dust.

"Boris," he whispered, "we did capture it!"

"We did," I replied softly.

Then he hugged the shattered young birch still more tightly, looked at me with his calm last smile and softly dropped his head on the quivering bush.

A light flashed, then another. . . . There was the soft, sad call of a bugle. The litter-bearers were coming.

# CHUCK AND GECK



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THERE was a man who dwelt in the forest by the Blue Mountains. He worked very hard but there was always more work to be done so that he had no time to go home for his holidays.

Finally, when winter came, he felt so terribly lonely that he decided to write to his wife inviting her to come and visit him with the boys.

He had two boys: Chuck and Geck.

They lived with their mother in a great big city far, far away — there was not a finer city in the whole wide world.

Day and night red stars sparkled atop the towers of this city.

And this city, of course, was called Moscow.

\*

Just as the mailman climbed the stairs with the letter, Chuck and Geck were engaged in battle. In short, they were having a fine scrap.

I have already forgotten what the fight was about. I have an idea that Chuck had filched Geck's matchbox — or perhaps it was Geck who made off with Chuck's empty shoe polish tin.

The two brothers had punched each other once and were just about to exchange another punch when the bell rang. They looked at each other in alarm.

They thought it was their mother. And she was not like other mothers. Instead of scolding them or shouting at them, she would simply put the culprits in separate rooms and keep them there for a whole hour, or even two, and would not let them play together.

And an hour — tick-tock — has sixty whole minutes in it. And two hours have even more than that.

And so the boys quickly wiped away their tears and rushed to open the door.

But it wasn't their mother after all. It was the mailman with a letter.

"From Dad!" they yelled. "Hurrah! It's from Dad! He must be coming soon!"

And they began to caper, leap and turn somersaults over the sofa out of sheer delight. Because, though Moscow was the most wonderful city in the world, when Dad was away for a whole long year, even Moscow could be a pretty dull place.

They were so excited and happy that they did not hear their mother come in.

Imagine her surprise when she found her two strapping youngsters sprawling on their backs, shrieking and beating a tattoo on the wall with

their heels; so vigorously, in fact, that the pictures over the sofa were shaking and the springs in the clock hummed.

But when she found out what the commotion was about she did not scold her boys.

Instead, she whisked them off the sofa, slipped out of her coat and pounced on the letter without even troubling to shake off the snowflakes that had already melted and were glittering like beads over her dark eyebrows.

\*

Letters, as everyone knows, can be jolly or sad. That is why Chuck and Geck studied their mother's face so intently as she read the letter.

At first she frowned, and they frowned too. Then she smiled. That meant the letter was a jolly one.

"Your father is not coming," she said as she put the letter away. "He has a lot of work to do and he can't come home."

Chuck and Geck looked at each other in bewilderment. The letter had turned out to be very sad indeed.

They commenced to pout, shuffle and dart angry glances at their mother, who, for some unknown reason, was smiling.

"He's not coming," she continued, "but he says we can go and visit him."

At that Chuck and Geck bounded off the sofa.

"Funny man!" their mother sighed. "Easy enough to say 'Come and visit' — as if all one had to do was get into a car and ride off."

"'Course!" Chuck put in quickly. "If he's inviting us, we ought to hop a car and go."

"Silly boy," said his mother. "To get there, you have to ride a train for a thousand, and then another thousand, and still another thousand kilometres. And after that you have to ride in a sleigh through the taiga. And there, in the taiga, you're sure to run into a wolf or a bear. Goodness, what a fantastic idea! Just think of it yourselves!"

But Chuck and Geck would not stop to think for even half a moment. They said they were ready to ride not only a thousand, but all of a hundred thousand kilometres. They weren't afraid of anything. They were brave. Why, didn't they drive away that stray dog from the yard with stones yesterday?

And they went on chattering, and swinging their arms, and stamping their feet, and hopping about while their mother sat still and did nothing but listen to them. Then all of a sudden she burst out laughing, swept them both up into her arms, whirled them around and finally tossed them onto the sofa.

And then she confessed that she had been expecting a letter like that for a long time and that she was only teasing them. Of course they would go.

\*

It took their mother a week to get them ready for the journey. Chuck and Geck did not waste time either.

Chuck made a dagger for himself out of a paring knife, while Geck found a smooth stick, hammered a nail into it and — lo — he had such a stout spear that if he were to stick it into a bear's heart, the beast would assuredly fall dead on the spot, provided someone pierced the animal's hide first, of course.

Finally all the arrangements were completed. The trunks were packed. A double lock was fixed to the door. The crumbs of bread, flour and cereals were brushed out of the cupboard so that there would be no mice. And then their mother went off to the railway station to buy tickets for the train leaving the next day.

It was while she was gone that Chuck and Geck had their fatal quarrel.

Alas! if they had only known what trouble that quarrel would cause, they certainly would have behaved themselves that day.

\*

Chuck, the thrifty one, owned a flat metal box in which he kept his tinfoil and candy wrappers with pictures of tanks, planes or Red Army men. Also a few blackbirds' feathers for arrows, some horsehair for a Chinese trick, and a few other things just as important.

Geck did not possess such a box. In general, Geck was a scatterbrain, although he was good at singing songs.

Now, it so happened that while Chuck was sorting out the contents of his precious box in the kitchen and Geck was singing in the other room, the mailman entered and handed Chuck a telegram for his mother.

Chuck put the telegram away in his box and went to see why Geck had stopped singing.

"Rah! Rah! Hurrah!" he was shouting. "Hey! Bey! Turumbey!"

Out of curiosity Chuck opened the door a trifle and espied such a turumbey that his hands began to tremble with rage.

There, in the middle of the room, stood a chair, and over its back hung a newspaper all tattered and torn by the spear. That wouldn't have been so bad, but that horrid Geck, imagining his mother's yellow cardboard shoebox to be a bear, kept stabbing at it with the spear for all he was worth. And in that box Chuck had stored away a tin bugle, three coloured November

Seventh badges and some money — 46 kopeks in all — which he had not squandered like Geck but had put away for their long journey.

As soon as he set eyes on the battered cardboard box, Chuck snatched the spear out of Geck's hands, broke it over his knee and flung the pieces to the floor.

But Geck, for all the world like a hawk carrying off a fledgling in front of its mother's nose, wrenched Chuck's metal box out of his hands and, jumping up onto the windowsill, hurled the box out of the window.

Chuck gave an ear-splitting howl and with cries of "the telegram! the telegram!" dashed out of the house as he was, without his coat, rubbers or cap.

Sensing that something was wrong, Geck hurried out after him.

In vain did they search for the metal box with the unopened telegram.

It had either fallen into a pile of snow and was now lying somewhere deep beneath it, or it had dropped onto the pathway and had been picked up by some one passing by. In any case, the box with the sealed telegram and all the other treasures was lost for good.

\*

At home, Chuck and Geck were silent for a long time. They had made it up again since they knew that both would get it hot from their mother. Being a whole year older than Geck, Chuck was afraid that he might come in for the greater share of the punishment, so he thought hard.

"You know what, Geck! What if we don't say anything about the telegram to Mom? What's a telegram, anyway! We can have just as much fun without it!"

"Mustn't tell a fib," sighed Geck. "Mom gets angrier when you fib."

"But we don't have to fib," Chuck exclaimed happily. "If she says: 'Where's the telegram?' we'll tell her. But supposing she doesn't, why should we go telling her ahead of time?"

"All right," agreed Geck. "If we don't have to tell a fib, we'll do as you say. That's a fine idea you got, Chuck."

They had decided the matter when their mother came in looking very pleased because she had managed to get good tickets for the train. She could not help noticing, though, that her dear boys' faces were long and their eyes wet.

"Now confess, my good citizens," she said, shaking the snow off her coat. "Now what was the fight about?"

"There wasn't any fight," said Chuck.

" 'Course there wasn't," Geck confirmed. "We were just going to fight when we thought we'd better not."

"Now that's the kind of thoughts I like," she said. She took off her coat, sat down on the sofa and showed them the stiff green tickets — one big one and two little ones.

Soon they had their supper. Then the noise subsided, the lights were turned off and everybody went to sleep.

And all the time the boys' mother knew nothing about the telegram and naturally did not ask them about it.

\*

The next day they left. But since the train drew out of the station at a very late hour, Chuck and Geck did not see anything interesting through the pitch-black windows.

At night Geck woke up feeling thirsty. Though the little lamp on the ceiling had been turned off, everything around Geck — the dancing glass on the white cloth of the table, the yellow orange that now looked green, and the face of his mother who was fast asleep — was suffused with a bluish light.

Through the snow-flecked window Geck saw the moon — it was far bigger than the moon in Moscow. He was quite certain now that the

train was speeding to the top of a high mountain from where you could almost reach for the moon.

He woke his mother and asked her for water to drink. But she refused to give him any for a very good reason and told him to suck a piece of orange instead.

Geck pouted, broke off a bit, but did not feel like sleeping any longer. He shook Chuck, wondering if he could get him to wake up. Chuck only snorted angrily and went on sleeping.

Geck then put on his felt boots, opened the door and went out into the corridor.

The corridor was long and narrow. There were several seats attached to the outer wall of the coach, and they shot back with a bang when you got off them. Ten more doors opened out onto the corridor. All of them were a glossy red and had shiny brass handles.

Geck sat on one little seat, then on another, then on a third and so on until he found himself at the end of the coach. But at that very moment the porter came in with his lantern and told Geck off for making so much noise when people were sleeping.

As soon as the porter went, Geck hurried back to his compartment. He opened the door with an effort, then closed it ever so carefully so as not to wake his mother, and jumped into the soft bed.

Finding old Chuck sprawled all over the

bed, Geck poked him in the side to make him move up.

But horrors! Instead of tow-headed chubby Chuck, what should Geck see but the angry moustached face of a strange man! It looked at him and barked gruffly:

"Who is pushing me?"

Geck let out a howl that brought all the passengers down from their berths. The light was switched on, and when Geck saw that he had walked into the wrong compartment, he howled still more loudly.

When they realized what had happened, everybody roared with laughter. The man with the moustache pulled on his trousers, got into his tunic and took Geck back to his own compartment.

Geck ducked under the blanket and quietened down. The train rocked and the wind moaned. The uncommonly big moon once more shed its blue light over the dancing glass, the bright yellow orange lying on the white cloth and the face of his mother who was smiling at something in her sleep, all unaware of her son's plight.

At last, Geck too fell asleep. . . .

*And he dreamed the strangest dream:  
The cars did stir, there was a scream,  
Then voices sounded everywhere —  
Each wheel with squeals did fill the air.*

*The speeding cars that formed the train  
Did join the engine's loud refrain.*

*First:*

*Then forward, mates! The night is black,  
But we must charge along our track.*

*Second:*

*O, engine-light, shine bright and far,  
And match the matchless morning star.*

*Third:*

*Blaze higher, flames. O whistle, shriek.  
O wheels, whirl Eastward like a streak.*

*Fourth:*

*We'll stop our noise at journey's end --  
When the Blue Mountains we ascend.*

When Geck woke up the wheels had stopped talking and were clicking along underfoot with a steady beat. The sun shone through the frosted window. The berths were made up and put back. Chuck, washed and brushed, was nibbling at an apple, while his mother and the army man with the moustache were standing at the open door and laughing at Geck's nocturnal adventures. Chuck showed Geck a pencil the army man had given him. It had a tip made out of a yellow cartridge.

But Geck was neither envious nor greedy.

What could you expect of a moony old scatter-brain like him? Not only had he walked into the wrong compartment at night, but even now he could not remember where he had put his trousers. But he certainly could sing songs, could Geck.

After washing and saying good morning to his mother, he pressed his face to the cold window-pane and peered out at the scenery flying past: what sort of places were these — he wanted to know — how did people live out here, what did they do?

And while Chuck was trotting from door to door and making friends with the other passengers who willingly gave him all sorts of handy little things like cork stoppers and pieces of string, Geck saw a great deal through the window.

Over there, for instance, stood a forest cottage. A little boy in shirtsleeves, with enormous felt boots on his feet and a cat in his arms, skipped out onto the porch. Swish! — and the cat somersaulted into the fluffy snow. Scrambling clumsily to the surface, it bounded quickly away.

Now why had he thrown the cat out like that? — he wanted to know. Most likely because it had snatched a tidbit off the table.

But now the house, the little boy, and the cat were gone. Instead, there was a factory in a field. The field was white. The smokestacks

were red. The smoke was black and the lights in the windows yellow.

What were they doing in the factory? — he wanted to know. But wait! Here was a sentry box and, standing by it, the sentry wrapped in a sheepskin coat. The sheepskin coat made him look so huge that his gun looked like a thin straw in his hands. But don't you dare go too near him!

And here came a forest twirling and dancing past the window. The trees in front leapt past in wild confusion while the ones farther back wound and billowed lazily like a snowy river.

The train swept past large, brightly-lit stations where no less than a hundred locomotives puffed and wheezed back and forth, and past tiny little stations — almost no bigger than the grocery stand round the corner from their home in Moscow.

Trains heaped with ore, coal and huge logs the size of half a coach kept flying past.

Once they overtook a trainload of cows and bulls. The locomotive was a funny little thing with a shrill squeaky whistle. Suddenly one of the bulls bellowed: "Moo-o-o! . . ." and the engine-driver jumped; he probably thought a big locomotive was coming on behind him.

At one little platform they stopped alongside a powerful armoured train.

On all its sides guns wrapped in tarpaulin

jutted out menacingly. And a lot of Red Army men were standing around it, laughing and stamping their feet.

One of them, in a leather coat, stood ever so quietly near the armoured car. He seemed to be thinking hard. Chuck and Geck decided that this, of course, was the commander of the train and that he was waiting for Voroshilov's order to open fire on the enemy.

Yes, they saw plenty of things on the way. It was only a pity that a storm was raging outside and the windows were often plastered with snow. At last their train rolled into a little station.

No sooner had their mother set them on the platform and taken their baggage from the army man acquaintance, than the train pulled out.

\*

The bags were heaped onto the snow. The wooden platform was soon deserted, but the boys' father was nowhere to be seen. Their mother grew very angry at their father; leaving the children to watch the things, she walked over to the sleigh-drivers to find out which of the sleighs had been sent for them, because they had another hundred kilometres of taigaland to cover to get to the place where their father lived.

Their mother was gone for some time. Mean-

while a wicked-looking goat appeared on the scene. At first it nibbled at the bark of a frozen log, then it bleated in a nasty way and finally began to glare with open hostility at Chuck and Geck.

Chuck and Geck took refuge behind the bags. You could never tell what the goats in these parts were after.

But here came their mother. She looked very downcast and told them that in all probability their father had not received their telegram and therefore had not sent a sleigh to the station for them.

They called a sleigh-driver. He nicked the goat on the back with his whip, then picked up the bags and carried them off to the refreshment room inside the station.

The refreshment room was very small. Behind the counter there puffed a fat samovar as big as Chuck. It shook and whistled and sent a thick cloud of steam to the boarded ceiling where a few little sparrows had found shelter from the cold and were chirping happily.

While Chuck and Geck were having their tea, their mother bargained with the sleigh-driver over the amount he would take to drive them through the taiga to their destination. The man asked for the huge sum of a hundred rubles. But come to think of it, it was really a long distance. At

last they agreed upon the fare and the sleigh-driver went off for bread, hay and sheepskin rugs.

"Your father doesn't even know we've arrived," their mother said with disappointment. "Won't he be surprised and happy to see us!"

"Sure he'll be surprised and happy," Chuck said very solemnly as he drank his tea. "I'll also be surprised and happy."

"Me too," said Geck. "You know what — let's drive up as quiet as mice, and if Dad is out somewhere, we can hide the bags and climb under the bed. When he comes in, he'll sit down and begin to think about something hard, and all the time we'll be holding our breaths. Then all of a sudden we'll let out a whoop!"

"I'm not going to climb under any bed," said their mother. "Or let out any whoops. You can climb under and whoop yourselves. Chuck, why are you putting the sugar in your pocket? They're full enough as it is — you've a regular garbage can there."

"I'm going out to feed the horses," Chuck retorted smoothly. "Geck, you'd better take a bun along too. You never have anything but you always go asking me for something."

Soon the sleigh-driver came back. The things were loaded onto the spacious sleigh. Hay was strewn over its bottom and the boys were tucked

in and covered over with blankets and sheepskins.

Good-bye big cities, factories, stations, villages and hamlets! Ahead lies the land of woods and hills and dense, black forests.

\*

They rode along merrily till dark, open-mouthed with wonder at the beauties of the hoary taiga. But after a while Chuck grew bored and asked his mother for a bun or a tart.

Naturally his mother gave him neither. He pouted, and for want of anything better to do began to push Geck and squeeze him against the edge of the sleigh.

At first Geck patiently kicked him off. But then he could stand it no longer and spat at Chuck. Chuck flared up and threw himself on Geck. But since their arms were pinned down by the sheepskins, all they could do was butt each other with their heads.

Their mother looked at them and laughed. The sleigh-driver whipped up the horses and off they flew. Two white fluffy hares skipped out onto the road and began to dance. The sleigh-driver yelled:

"Hey, there! O-ho-ho! . . . Look out or we'll run you over!"

The mischievous hares scampered off bubbling with glee. A blustering wind blew down on the little party. Chuck and Geck hugged each other as the sleigh coasted downhill towards the taiga and the moon which was slowly rising over the approaching Blue Mountains.

Then suddenly the horses of their own accord halted by a little snowed-under hut.

"Here's where we stop for the night," said the driver, jumping off the sleigh. "This is our station."

It was a very small hut. And it was quite empty.

A kettle was soon set to boil and the sleigh-driver brought in a hamper of food.

You could have hammered nails with the sausage — it was so stiff and frozen. They soaked it in hot water and put slices of bread on the hot stove to toast.

Rummaging behind the stove, Chuck found a dented spring. The sleigh-driver told him that the spring was part of a trap to catch animals with.

The spring was rusty and had been lying there for no good reason. Chuck could see that right away.

After tea they went to bed. A wide wooden bedstead stood by the wall. A heap of dry leaves

made up its mattress. Geck would not sleep at the side nearest the wall or in the middle of the bed. He liked to sleep on the outside. And though he still remembered the lullaby sung to him as a baby, the words of which ran:

*"Lullaby, baby, my heart's pride,  
Don't lie in bed on the outside,"*

he still continued to sleep on the outside.

If he found himself in the middle, he was sure to pull the blanket off his bedfellow, dig his elbows into him and press his knees into his stomach.

They went to bed without undressing and covered themselves with the sheepskins. Chuck hugged the wall, his mother lay in the middle and Geck slept on the outside.

The sleigh-driver blew out the candle and climbed onto the stove. Everybody fell asleep at once. At night, however, Geck felt thirsty as usual and woke up.

Still groggy with sleep, he drew on his felt boots, pattered over to the table, drank some water out of the kettle and then sat down on a stool by the window.

The moon had drifted behind the clouds and the snowy hillocks seemed bluish-black through the frozen windowpanes.

"Looks like Dad has almost reached the end of the earth!"

Surely, he thought, there could not be many places in the world farther away than this.

Suddenly he lifted his head. He thought he heard a knock outside the window. It was not even a knock but more like the sound of snow crunching under somebody's heavy footsteps. Yes, that was it! Out there in the dark something heaved a sigh, moved and shifted its feet. Geck felt sure it was a bear.

"Wicked Bear! What do you want? We're taking such a long time to get to Daddy, and you want to gobble us up so we never get to see him again? Oh no you don't! Better go away before someone shoots you down out of his good gun or stabs you with his sharp sabre."

Geck muttered these words under his nose, while he pressed his face hard against the ice-plastered pane of the narrow window. He was both frightened and curious.

But just then the moon came out from behind the fleeting clouds. The bluish-black snow glittered with a soft, dull sheen and Geck saw that the bear was not a bear after all, but their horse that had got untied and was stamping around the sleigh and nibbling at the hay on it.

Geck was disappointed. He crawled back under the sheepskin. And since he had been

having unpleasant thoughts, he dreamt an unpleasant dream.

*The strangest dream did Geckie dream:  
He had a fright — an ogre mean  
Stood spitting spit that burned and seared,  
And swung an iron fist, and leered.*

*Past raging fires, o'er trampled snow! —  
The soldiers goose-step row on row. —  
They dragged along the vilest dross:  
A crooked fascist flag and cross.*

"Hey, stop!" Geck shouted at them. "You're going the wrong way! You can't come this way!"

But nobody stopped or listened to Geck.

Geck got angry, and drew out his tin bugle, the one that was stored away in Chuck's cardboard shoebox, and blew on it so hard that the silent commander of the armoured train raised his head sharply. An imperative wave of the hand and all those fierce, heavy guns of his barked out at the same time.

"Good!" Geck cried gleefully. "Give them some more! One's not enough for them!"

\*

Both boys kicked and pushed so much that their mother woke up.

She turned towards Chuck and felt something stiff and sharp prick her side. She felt around and pulled out the trap spring which the ever-thrifty Chuck had secretly taken to bed with him.

She threw it away. Then she glanced at Geck's face that was lit up by the moon and saw that he was having troublous dreams.

A dream, of course, is not a spring and you cannot throw it away. But it can be blown away. So she turned him on his side and, rocking him gently, began to blow on his flushed little forehead.

Soon Geck smacked his lips and smiled. That meant his bad dreams had been blown away.

After that his mother got out of bed and went over to the window in her stocking feet.

It had not yet dawned and the sky was still covered with stars. Some stars twinkled from a great distance while others hung right over the taiga.

And — strange thing! Sitting where Geck had been sitting she thought just as he had that there were surely few places on earth farther away than this spot that her restless husband had come to.

\*

The whole of the following day their way lay through forests and over hills. When they rode

uphill, the sleigh-driver got off and plodded alongside in the snow. But on the steep down-grades their sleigh slid so rapidly that Chuck and Geck felt as if sleigh, horses and all were shooting down from the skies.

At last, towards evening, when both travellers and horses were pretty tired out, the sleigh driver said:

"Well, here we are! Behind that point there's a turn. And in the opening beyond we'll find the camp."

"Come on, there! Giddap!"

Chuck and Geck jumped up, squealing with delight, but at that moment the sleigh jerked and they both tumbled back into the hay.

Their mother smiled and threw back the woollen scarf that had been wrapped round her fluffy beret.

Here was the turn. The sleigh veered smartly and came to a stop near three little houses standing in a small opening in the forest that was sheltered from the winds.

But — strange! Not a single dog barked and there was not a soul in sight. No smoke curled up from the chimneys. All the pathways were snowed over and all around reigned the stillness of a cemetery in winter. The only living things visible were a few white-winged magpies hopping about stupidly from tree to tree.

"Are you sure this is the place?" their mother asked the driver in a frightened voice.

"This is it all right," said the driver. "Those three houses over there are Geological Research Station No. 3. There's a sign on the post . . . see? Maybe it's Station No. 4 you're wanting? That's two hundred kilometres in the other direction."

"No, no," their mother said, as she scanned the sign. "This is the one we're looking for. But the doors are all locked and there's snow on the porches. Where can all the people be?"

"That I can't say," the driver said, perplexed. "Last week we brought food out here: some flour, onions and potatoes. All the men were here. Eight of them, not counting the chief and the watchman. Nice kettle of fish! The wolves couldn't have gobbled 'em up. You wait here while I look in the watchman's house."

Throwing off his sheepskin coat, the driver ploughed through the snow to the hut nearest them.

He soon came back.

"The house is empty, but the stove is still warm. The watchman must still be around — he's probably out hunting. He'll be back before night and tell you everything you want to know."

"But what can he tell me?" their mother cried. "I can see myself that the men have been gone for some time."

"Don't know what he'll tell you", replied the driver. "But tell you something he will, because he's the watchman."

They drove up to the porch with great difficulty. A little path led from it to the forest.

They walked into the closed porch, past shovels, brooms, axes and sticks, past a frozen bearskin hanging from an iron hook, and entered the room.

The sleigh-driver brought up the rear with the baggage. It was warm in the hut.

The driver went out to feed the horses and their mother helped the frightened boys off with their coats in silence.

"That was an awful long way to come and find your Dad gone!"

She sank onto a bench and thought hard. What had happened? Why was the camp deserted? What were they to do now? Go back? But she had just enough money to pay the driver. They would have to wait for the watchman. But the driver would leave them in three hours' time — and what if the watchman should not return before then? The nearest railway station and telegraph office were almost a hundred kilometres away.

The driver came in, glanced round the room, sniffed, and then went up to the stove and looked into the oven.

"The watchman will be back before nightfall," he told them. "See, here's a pot of cabbage soup. If he were off for a long trip he'd have put the cabbage soup out in the cold. But you do as you think best," he continued. "Seeing as things are, I can take you back to the station free of charge; I'm not hardhearted."

"No," their mother said. "There's no use our going back to the station."

They put the kettle on again, thawed off the sausage, ate and drank, and while their mother brought out their things, Chuck and Geck climbed up onto the warm stove. There was a smell of birch twigs there, and of warm sheepskins and pine shavings. And since their mother was silent, Chuck and Geck were silent too. But it was hard to be quiet for any length of time, so, for want of anything better to do, Chuck and Geck fell fast asleep.

They did not hear the driver leave, or their mother climb up and lie down beside them. They awoke when it was already very dark in the hut. The three of them were roused at the same time by the sound of stamping on the porch. Something fell with a loud clatter on the closed porch — a spade evidently. The door swung open and the watchman walked in with a lantern in his hand and a big shaggy dog at his heels.

He slipped his rifle off his back, threw a dead

hare onto the bench and, lifting his lantern over the stove, said:

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm the wife of Seryogin, the chief of the geological party," replied their mother, coming down from the stove, "and these are his children."

The watchman raised his lantern to the scared faces of Chuck and Geck.

"The spit image of their dad, all right. Especially this plump fellow here," and he pointed his finger at Chuck.

Chuck and Geck were hurt. Chuck, because the man said he was fat, and Geck, because he always considered himself more like his father than Chuck.

"Perhaps you will tell me why you had to come rushing out here like this?" the watchman inquired, glancing at their mother. "You were told not to come, you know."

"I don't know what you mean. Who told us not to come?"

"You were told not to come. I myself took Seryogin's telegram to the station, and it said clear as anything: 'Postpone trip for two weeks. Party going into taiga.'"

"And when Seryogin says, 'Postpone trip,' it means postpone trip. Breaking orders, that's what you're doing."

"What telegram are you talking about?" their

mother asked again. "We didn't get any telegram." And as though seeking for confirmation, she looked up dazedly at Chuck and Geck.

But she found them eyeing each other with alarm and backing quickly into the recesses of the stove.

"Children!" she exclaimed, glancing at the boys with suspicion. "Did you get any telegram in my absence?"

Up on the stove the dry leaves and twigs crackled, but there was no answer.

"Answer me!" their mother cried. "Did you receive a telegram in my absence and forget to give it to me?"

Several more seconds passed. Then suddenly a lusty bawl poured forth from the top of the stove. Chuck's voice sounded the lower notes of the register whereas Geck's took the high notes and trills.

"You wicked children!" their mother wailed. "You'll be the death of me yet. Stop that noise now and tell me what happened."

At the mention of the word death, Chuck and Geck howled still more loudly. Quite some time passed before they could be made to tell their sad tale, not without much wrangling as to whose fault it was.

Well, what can one do with such children? Beat them? Put them in prison? Shackle them with ball and chain and send them out to do hard labour? No, their mother did not do any of these things. She only sighed and ordered her sons to get off the stove, wipe their noses and wash themselves, and then asked the watchman what he thought she should do now.

The watchman said that the geological party had gone off to the Alkarash Gorge on an urgent assignment and would not be back for at least ten days.

"But how can we get along for ten days?" their mother asked. "We haven't any food with us!"

"You'll have to manage somehow," the watchman replied. "I'll leave you some bread and you can have that hare — skin it and cook it. Tomorrow I have to go the taiga for a couple of days. I've got to have a look at my traps."

The children's mother was horrified. "But how can we stay here alone? We don't know anything about the place, and all around us there's nothing but forest and beasts...."

"I'll leave you a rifle," said the watchman. "There's wood in the shed and a spring beyond the hillock. Here are some cereals in a sack, and the salt's in this can. I haven't got time, you understand, to bother with you...."

"Ooh, what a nasty man," Geck whispered to Chuck. "Come on, Chuck, let's give it to him."

"Yah?" said Chuck. "Just try and you see if he doesn't throw us out of the house. Better wait until Dad comes. We'll tell on him then."

"Until Dad comes? But he won't be here for ever so long. And look at poor Mom."

Geck went up to his mother, climbed on her lap, and, knitting his blond eyebrows, scowled sternly at the watchman.

The watchman took off his fur jacket and went to the table on which the lantern stood.

Only then did Geck notice that a large piece of fur had been ripped out of the back of the man's coat, all the way down from shoulder to beltline.

"The cabbage soup's in the stove," he said to their mother. "The spoons and bowls are over there on the shelf. Sit down and eat. Meanwhile I'll tend to my coat."

"You're the host here," said their mother. "You set out the food and give me your coat. I'm sure I'll do a better patching job on it than you."

The watchman glanced up at her and encountered Geck's stern glare.

"Oho! You're a stubborn lot, I can see that," he muttered. Giving her his coat, he got up and went to the shelf for the plates.

"Where did you get all torn up like that?" Chuck asked, pointing to the hole in the coat.

"Had a little scrap with a bear. He gave me a scratch," the watchman replied sullenly, as he plopped a heavy pot of cabbage soup onto the table.

"Did you hear that, Geck!" cried Chuck, when the watchman left the room. "He had a fight with a bear; I suppose that's why he's so angry today."

Geck had heard, but he did not like to see his mother mistreated by anyone, even if it were a man who could scrap with a bear, and fight it single-handed.

At daybreak the next morning, the watchman collected his sack, gun and dog, put on his skis and plunged into the taiga. Now they had to shift for themselves.

All three went out for water. A little spring gushed out into the snow from an overhanging rock. Steam, as dense as a kettle's, rose from the water, but when Geck put his finger under the stream, he found that the water was ice-cold.

Next they brought in the wood. Their mother did not know how to fire the Russian stove, and the wood would not catch alight for a long time. When it finally did begin to burn, the flames were so hot that the thick layer of ice on the window of the opposite wall thawed off almost at once.

Now you could see the fringe of the forest through it, and the trees in which the magpies were hopping from branch to branch, and the rocky summit of the Blue Mountains.

Their mother knew how to pluck and prepare a chicken, but she had never skinned hares before, so she took quite a long time about it.

Chuck willingly helped her and was rewarded with the hare's tail; it was so light and fluffy that it floated through the air like a parachute when he threw it down from the stove.

After dinner the three of them went out for a walk.

Chuck urged his mother to take along a gun or at least a few cartridges. But she would not take the gun along.

Instead, she hung the gun up on the highest hook, then stood up on a stool and put the cartridges away on the topmost shelf, warning Chuck that if he should ever dare to filch one little cartridge he'd never know a day of peace again.

Chuck reddened and scampered away. One cartridge was already hidden away in his pocket.

It was a very strange walk indeed. They walked in single file along the narrow path leading to the spring. The sky above shone a cold blue and the jagged cliffs of the Blue Mountains loomed like dream castles and towers.

The inquisitive magpies rent the frosty silence with their cries. Red, nimble-footed squirrels leapt and dived through the thick branches of the cedars. Under the trees the footprints of strange beasts and birds wove a weird pattern on the soft white carpet of snow.

Suddenly something groaned, wailed and snapped in the taiga. Most likely a lump of frozen snow had broken away from the summit of the mountain and had gone crashing downwards through the brush.

Formerly, in Moscow, Geck had thought that the whole world consisted of Moscow, its streets, houses, lampposts, cars and buses.

Now it seemed to him that the whole world was made up of one huge dark forest.

In general, if the sun shone over Geck, he was sure the sky all round the earth was clear of clouds or rain.

Two days passed. Came a third, and still no watchman appeared from the forest. There was a feeling of alarm in the little, snow-covered hut.

It was most terrifying in the evenings and at night. They locked and bolted the doors of both the room and porch, blacked out the windows with mats so that the light would not attract the beasts to the house, although they should have done just the opposite, because a beast is not a man, and he is afraid of fire.

The wind whistled down the chimney in the usual way, and when the blizzard outside whipped sharp little icicles against the walls and the windowpanes, it seemed to those inside that someone was scraping and scratching at the door.

They climbed onto the stove and their mother told them all sorts of stories and fairy tales. At last she dozed off.

"Chuck," said Geck. "How come there are magicians only in fairy tales? Wouldn't it be fun if there were real magicians?"

"You mean, witches and devils?"

"Naw," Geck shook his head with annoyance. "Who cares for devils anyway? They're no good for anything. But if we could call a magician, we could tell him to fly over to our Dad and let him know we've come long ago."

"And what would he fly on?"

"Fly on? . . . Why, he'd just flap his arms or do something else. He'd find a way, don't you worry."

"It's too cold now for him to flap his arms," said Chuck. "Look at me: I had both my gloves and mitts on, and still I got my fingers frozen bringing in the wood."

"No, but honestly, Chuck, don't you think it would be fun?"

"How should I know?" Chuck wavered. "Remember the lame man who lived in the

basement in our yard? Well, he used to sell doughnuts, or cigarettes or something, and all sorts of old women used to go down to him and get their fortunes told — you know, about who'd have any luck and who wouldn't and all that."

"Well, and did their fortunes really come true?"

"I don't know. I only know the militia came and took him away and a lot of stolen things were found in his place."

"Well, that shows he wasn't a magician at all. He was just a crook. What do you think?"

"Of course he was a crook," Chuck agreed. "But what I mean is — all magicians are crooks. What does a fellow like him want to work for, when all he has to do is wriggle through a hole to get what he wants? But you'd better get to sleep, Geck, because I'm not going to talk to you any more."

"Why not?"

"Because whenever you talk a lot of nonsense you start seeing nightmares and dig your knees into me. You think it's nice the way you lammed me in the stomach last night?"

\*

On the morning of the fourth day their mother had to chop wood herself. They had eaten the

hare long ago and the magpies had already picked the bones clean. All they had for dinner now was porridge with lard and a few onions. Their stock of bread was giving out, but their mother found some flour and baked a few biscuits for them.

Once, after such a meal, Geck felt very low and his mother wondered if he hadn't developed a temperature.

She ordered him to stay inside. Then she dressed Chuck, took a pail and a little sleigh and the two went out for water. They also went up to the woods to gather sticks to start the stove with in the morning.

\*

Chuck and his mother were gone for some time. On their way back the little sleigh with the pail of water overturned and all the water spilled out, so they had to go back to the spring. Then, halfway home, they discovered that Chuck had left one of his mittens at the edge of the forest. Again they turned back. In the meantime dusk fell.

When they got home at last Geck was nowhere to be found. First they thought he was hiding behind the stove under a pile of sheepskins; but no, he was not there.

Chuck smiled slyly and whispered into his

mother's ear that Geck, of course, was under the stove.

His mother grew very angry at that and ordered Geck to come out at once. But Geck was silent.

Then Chuck took the long stove fork and began to poke about with it under the stove. No, Geck was not there either.

His mother became really worried then. She glanced at the nail in the door. Geck's coat and hat were gone.

She went out and looked around the house. Then she came back in and lit the lantern. She peered into the dark storage room and into the woodshed.

She called Geck, scolded and wheedled, but no response came. And meanwhile the gloom was swiftly swallowing up the snowy hummocks.

She darted into the house again, tore the gun off its nail, seized the cartridges and lantern, and telling Chuck not to dare leave the house, ran out into the yard.

Plenty of footprints had been stamped into the snow during the past four days.

She did not know where to begin her search, but decided to follow the path, since she did not think Geck would have taken to the woods.

There was not a soul on the path.

She loaded the gun and shot. Then she

strained her ears. She shot a second time and then a third.

Suddenly from somewhere quite near came an answering report. Somebody was hurrying to the rescue. She wanted to rush forward, but her felt boots sunk into the snow. The lantern fell out of her hand, its glass broke and the light went out.

Suddenly a piercing scream issued from the direction of the porch of the watchman's house.

That was Chuck. Having heard the shots, he thought that after having devoured Geck the wolves were now attacking his mother.

She kicked the lantern away, and ran, sobbing, to the house. She pushed the coatless Chuck into the hut, threw the gun into a corner, dipped a ladle into the icy water and gulped greedily. Something clattered and banged on the porch. Then the door flew open and into the house raced the dog Plucky followed by the watchman in a cloud of steam.

"What's the matter? What's all the noise about?" he asked, without greeting them or taking off his things.

"I've lost my boy," she said.

Tears welled up in her eyes and streamed down her face. She could say no more.

"Just a moment, now. Stop crying," the

watchman snapped. "When did you lose him? Was it a long while ago, or just now? Back, Plucky!" he ordered the dog. "For goodness' sake, speak up!"

"An hour ago," she replied. "We were out fetching the water and when we came back he was gone. He put his hat and coat on and walked off."

"He couldn't have gone very far in an hour, and he couldn't have frozen in his felt boots and coat. Come here, Plucky! Have a sniff at this."

The watchman pulled Geck's hood off the hook and shoved it together with Geck's shoes under the dog's nose.

The dog sniffed at the things carefully and lifted its clever eyes to its master's face.

"Follow me!" cried the watchman, throwing the door open. "Come on, let's have a look around, Plucky."

But the dog wagged its tail and remained where it was.

"Out with you, now," said the watchman sternly. "Out and search, Plucky!"

The dog nosed the air restlessly, pawed the floor, but did not budge.

"What's all this capering about," the watchman demanded crossly. Once more he shoved the hood and shoes under the dog's nose, and then took hold of its collar.

But Plucky would not follow the watchman. He turned round and round and finally stalked off in the opposite direction.

He stopped near a big wooden trunk and scratched its lid with his shaggy paw. Then, turning to his master, he gave three loud and lazy barks.

The watchman put his gun into the hands of the astounded mother, went over to the trunk and threw back its lid.

There, on a heap of sheepskins and sacks, lay Geck fast asleep. He was covered with his coat and his head rested on his hat.

When he was lifted out and roused, his sleepy eyes blinked. He could not understand why such a noise, fuss and pother was being made about him. His mother kept kissing him and crying. Chuck kept plucking him by the arm and leg and jumping and shouting:

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

And shaggy Plucky, upon whose nose Chuck planted a kiss, turned away in embarrassment. He also could not understand what the commotion was about. He wagged his tail gently, and eyed with longing a crust of bread lying on the table.

It turned out that Geck had felt terribly bored when his mother and Chuck went away, and he decided to play a practical joke on them. Taking down his hat and coat, he climbed into the trunk

with the things. His idea was to wait till they got back and began searching for him, and then give them the scare of their lives by bellowing inside the trunk.

But since they had taken such a long time to come, he just lay there patiently until he quietly dozed off. And that was all!

Suddenly the watchman got up and clapped a heavy key and creased blue envelope on the table.

"Here, this is for you," he said. "This is the key to the room of our chief Seryogin and a letter from him. He'll be here with his men in four days, just in time for New Year's."

So that was where this surly, gruff-looking old man had been! He said he had to look after his traps, and instead he had skied all the way to the distant Alkarash Gorge.

Leaving the letter unopened, the boys' mother got up and placed her hand on the old man's shoulder.

Instead of replying, he grumbled at Geck for spilling the box of wads in the trunk, and at their mother for breaking the lantern. He grumbled long and persistently, but nobody was scared of this glum old man any more.

Geck's mother sat by his side the whole evening long, and at the slightest noise snatched at his hand as if she were afraid he would

suddenly disappear. She was so nice to him that Chuck finally took offence and was sorry he hadn't also thought of climbing into the trunk.

\*

And now the real fun began. The next morning the watchman unlocked their father's room, heated the stove to a blaze, and brought over their things. The room was large and light, but everything in it was in great disorder.

The boys' mother commenced house-cleaning at once. All day long she moved things from place to place, scrubbed, washed and dusted.

When, in the evening, the watchman brought in the wood, he stopped at the threshold in amazement. The room was so clean that he dared not take another step.

But Plucky came right in.

He bounded across the freshly-scrubbed floor towards Geck and nudged him with his cold nose. "Hello, silly," he seemed to be saying, "it was I who found you and you ought to give me something nice to eat for that."

The boys' mother threw him a piece of sausage.

Whereupon the watchman started to grumble and declared that if dogs were to be fed on sausage in the taiga, the magpies would be set a-laughing.

And so she sliced off a half-length of sausage for him too. He said "Thank you," and went out, muttering to himself and shaking his grey head at the queer ways these city folks had.

The next day they decided to put up a Christmas Tree.

What didn't they use to make the toys with!

They cut all the coloured pictures out of the old magazines they found. Rags and cotton went into the manufacture of toys and animals. From their father's tobacco box they took all the tissue paper and made lovely flowers.

Surly and gloomy though he was, after bringing in the wood the watchman would stand in the doorway for long spells at a time marvelling at the children's ingenuity. At length he could contain himself no longer. He brought them some tinfoil, the kind that was used to wrap tea in, and a big chunk of wax. What fun! The toy factory was immediately transformed into a wax factory.

The candles were crude little things. But they burned as brightly as those expensive ones you buy in the city shops.

Now came the time to put up the Christmas Tree. The boys' mother asked the watchman for his axe. He made no reply, but got up, put on his skis and went out to the forest.

In an hour he was back.

Well, you can say what you like: you can say the toys were not so attractive, that the rag bunnies looked more like cats, that the dolls were all alike — straight-nosed and goggle-eyed — and that the fir cones wrapped in tinfoil did not sparkle as brightly as those coloured glass bulbs you see in the shops. But the Christmas Tree — why there wasn't one like it in the whole of Moscow! It was a real taiga beauty — tall and stately and straight, with branches tipped with little green stars.

\*

Four days slipped by unnoticed. And then at last New Year's Eve arrived. From early morning Chuck and Geck could not be induced to go indoors. Their noses were blue, but they tramped about in the frost waiting for their father and his men to appear at any moment. The watchman, who was busy heating up the bath, told them they were freezing themselves to icicles for nothing because the party would not return before dinner time.

And that was exactly how it happened. No sooner had they sat down to table than the watchman knocked at the window. Throwing on their coats helter-skelter, all three tumbled out onto the porch.

"Keep your eyes peeled now," the watchman

said. "In a few seconds you'll see them on the slope of that hill over there to the right of the big summit, then they'll disappear again into the taiga and inside of thirty minutes they'll be home."

And that was exactly how it happened. First to heave in sight from behind the mountain pass was a dog team harnessed to a few loaded sleighs, and after them came a group of men moving swiftly on skis.

They looked very tiny out there with the huge mountains behind them, but their arms, legs and heads were clearly etched against the white snow.

Down the bare slope they skimmed, finally to disappear into the depths of the forest.

In exactly half an hour the sounds of barking, shouting, and creaking of skis could be heard close at hand.

Sensing the nearness of home, the hungry dogs shot swiftly out of the woods. And behind them, keeping apace, sped nine skiers.

When the men sighted Chuck and Geck and the children's mother on the porch, they waved their sticks in the air, and, without slowing down, gave a loud cheer.

Geck could not wait any longer after that and careered down the steps. Leaping and sinking in

the snow he dashed towards the tall, bearded man who headed the group and who was shouting "hurrah" louder than all the others.



The rest of the day was spent in washing, brushing and cleaning up.

And in the evening they all sat down to a merry New Year party.

The table was laid, the lamps blown out and the candles lighted. But since, except for Chuck and Geck, everybody else was grown-up, they did not know what to do after that.

It was a lucky thing that one of the men had an accordion. He brought it out and played a lively waltz on it. Then everybody jumped up and began to dance. And they all danced very well indeed — especially when they danced with Mom.

But the boy's father did not dance. He was very strong and good-natured. He had only to pace the floor, let alone dance, to set all the crockery clattering in the cupboard.

He put Chuck and Geck on his knees and they clapped their hands loudly in time to the music.

Soon the dance was over. The boys' mother asked Geck to sing a song.

Geck did not fuss or refuse. He knew he could sing and was quite proud of the fact.

The accordion-player accompanied him. I can't remember at the moment what he sang. But I do remember that it was a very nice song, because everybody was very quiet when he sang it. When he paused to catch his breath, you could hear the candles snapping and the wind moaning outside.

And when he finished everybody began to clap and shout. They seized Geck and wanted to throw him up in the air. But his mother quickly snatched him away from them, because she was afraid they might hit him against the board ceiling in the excitement.

"Now sit down, everybody," said their father, glancing at his watch. "The main part of the program is about to take place." He switched on the radio. Everyone sat down and waited in silence.

First it was very quiet. Then they heard a noise, the sound of automobiles honking their horns. Then there was a sort of scraping and hissing, and from far away came a melodious tinkle.

Big and little bells were ringing a refrain like this:

*Teer-lil-lilli-dong!*  
*Teer-lil-lilli-dong!*

Chuck and Geck looked at each other. They knew what it was. It was the golden Kremlin chimes pealing out over the red star of the Spassky Tower in faraway Moscow.

And these chimes — on the eve of New Year — were heard by people everywhere — in town and hillside, in steppe and taiga, and on the blue seas.

And, of course, the quiet commander of the armoured train, the one who waited so patiently for Voroshilov's orders, he also heard the chimes.

Everybody stood up. They wished each other a Happy New Year. And lots of good luck.

And to each one good luck meant something different.

But one and all knew and understood that they must live honourably, work hard, and love and cherish the vast land that bears the name of the Soviet Union.

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# THE BLUE CUP



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I WAS thirty-two at the time, Marusya was twenty-nine and our little Svetlana was six and a half.

That year my vacation came at the end of the summer, and so we rented a cottage not far from Moscow for the last warm month of the season.

Svetlana and I had planned to fish, to swim and to gather nuts and mushrooms in the woods. But it turned out that first we had to sweep the yard, mend the rickety fence, put up clothes lines and hammer in spikes and nails.

We soon got fed up with all this, but Marusya kept thinking up new things for herself to do and for us to do.

Only toward the evening of the third day did we finally get everything done. But just as the three of us were about to go out for a walk, Marusya's friend, an Arctic flyer, dropped in on her.

They sat under the cherry tree in the garden for a long time. To work off our disappointment, Svetlana and I went out to the shed in the yard and began to whittle a whirligig.

When it grew dark, Marusya called out to Svetlana to drink her milk and go to bed. Then Marusya walked with the flyer to the railroad station.

But I found it dull without Marusya, and Svetlana did not want to sleep alone in an empty house. So we took a cup of flour from the pantry, poured boiling water over it and made some paste.

We pasted coloured paper over the whirligig, smoothed it out neatly and then climbed through the dusty attic to the roof.

From our perch on top of the roof, we could see our neighbour's garden. Smoke was coming from a samovar near the porch, and on the porch sat the neighbour himself, a lame old man, playing his balalaika for a cluster of boys and girls.

Suddenly a barefoot, hunched old woman came bustling out of the dark doorway. She shooed away the boys and girls, scolded the old man, and, snatching up a rag, began to beat the samovar to bring it to a boil sooner.

We laughed. Now a wind will blow, we thought, and it'll turn our little whirligig and make it whirl. And lots of boys and girls will come running up to our house from all around. Then we'll have company too.

And tomorrow we'll think up something else to do.

We could dig a deep cave for the frog that lives in our garden near the damp cellar.

Or we could ask Marusya for some strong cord and fly a kite — fly it higher than the silo, higher than the yellow pines, higher even than the hawk that was watching our landlady's chicks and bunny rabbits all day long from up in the sky.

Or we could take out a rowboat early tomorrow morning, with myself at the oars, Marusya at the rudder, and Svetlana the passenger, and go far up the river where they say there is a large woods, with two hollow birches at the river's edge. The girl next door found three good mushrooms there yesterday. It's a pity, though, that all three were wormy.

Suddenly Svetlana tugged at my sleeve.

"Look, Daddy," s'he said. "Isn't that Mummie coming? We'd better take care, or we'll get a good scolding."

Yes, it was our Marusya coming down the path alongside the fence; we did not think she would be back so soon.

"Bend down," I said to Svetlana. "Maybe she won't see us."

But Marusya noticed us at once and called out:

"What are you doing up there on the roof, you good-for-nothings? It's damp outside, and

Svetlana should have been in bed long ago. The moment I'm not in the house you are ready to do mischief until midnight!"

"Marusya," I replied, "we're not doing mischief. We're putting up our whirligig. Let us stay here just a little while longer — we've only three more nails to drive in."

"You can drive them in tomorrow," Marusya ordered. "And now climb down, or I really will get angry."

Svetlana and I looked at each other. We saw that our case was hopeless. So we came down. But we felt hurt.

We felt hurt, even though Marusya had brought Svetlana a big apple from the station, and a package of tobacco for me.

And feeling hurt we fell asleep.

\*

Next morning there was new trouble! The moment we awoke Marusya came over to us and said:

"Better own up, you mischief-makers. Who broke my blue cup in the pantry?"

It was not I. And Svetlana said she had not broken it either. We eyed each other. Marusya is really overdoing it this time, we thought to ourselves.

But Marusya would not believe us.

"Cups," she said, "aren't alive. They haven't any feet, and so they can't very well jump to the floor by themselves. And nobody else but the two of you was in the pantry yesterday. You broke it and won't own up. Fie on you, comrades!"

After breakfast, Marusya suddenly dressed up and set off for town. Svetlana and I sat down, dejected.

A nice boat ride, indeed!

The sun was peeping in through the window. The sparrows were hopping along the gravel walks. The chicks were crawling back and forth through the wattle fence. But still we felt sad.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "Yesterday we were chased off the roof. A few days back our empty kerosene can was taken from us. And now we're scolded for breaking an old blue cup we never broke. Call that a grand life?"

"Certainly not," said Svetlana. "It's a very, very sad life."

"You know what, Svetlana? Put on your pink dress. We'll get my knapsack out from behind the stove, put your apple in it, and my tobacco, and a box of matches, and a knife and a bun, and leave this house. We'll just wander off wherever our legs take us."

Svetlana pondered a moment, and then asked:

"And where will your legs take you?"

"They'll take me right out to that yellow

glade you see through the window, where our landlady's cow is grazing. And I know that beyond the glade there's a duck pond and beyond the pond there's a water mill, and beyond the mill there's a birch grove. And the birch grove's on a hill. But I'm afraid I don't know what lies beyond the hill."

"All right," agreed Svetlana. "We'll take the bread, and the apple and the tobacco. But you must take along a big stick too, because there's a dreadful dog named Rex out that way, and the boys told me he almost bit somebody to death."

We put everything we needed into the knapsack, shut all five windows, locked both doors, and slipped the key under the porch.

"Farewell, Marusya! You can say what you like, but we did not break that cup of yours!"

\*

Just outside the gate we met the milkwoman.

"Do you need any milk?" she inquired.

"No, my good woman. We don't need anything else."

"But my milk is very good. It's fresh. From my own cow." The milkwoman was offended.

"When you return you'll be sorry."

Her cold milk cans clattering, she bustled off. How could she know we were going far, far away and might never return?

For that matter, nobody could know it.

A sunburned boy rode by on his bicycle. A fat man in shorts, with a pipe in his mouth, strolled past, most likely on his way to the woods for mushrooms. A girl, her blond hair wet from a swim, strode down the road. But we met nobody we knew.

We cut across some vegetable gardens and reached a glade all yellow with celandine. There we took off our sandals and continued barefoot along the warm path through the meadow to the mill.

Suddenly we noticed somebody running toward us as fast as he could. He was bent almost double, and clods of earth were flying after him from behind a clump of willows.

We thought it very strange. What could it mean? Svetlana's eyes were very sharp. She stopped and said:

"I know who's running. That's Sanka Karyakin, the little boy who lives near the house with the tomato patch that somebody's pigs got into. Yesterday he rode past our house on a goat. Remember?"

Sanka stopped when he reached us and began to wipe his tears with a calico market bag.

"What were you running like that for, Sanka? And why were lumps of earth flying after you from the bushes?" we asked.

Sanka turned away and said:

"Grandma sent me to the collective-farm grocery for salt. But that Pioneer, Pashka Bukamashkin, is over at the mill and wants to beat me up."

Svetlana looked at him. What do you know about that!

Was there a law in the Land of Soviets that a person running to the collective farm grocery for salt and minding his own business could be attacked for no reason at all?

"Come with us, Sanka," Svetlana said. "Don't be afraid. We're going your way and we'll stick up for you."

The three of us set off through the willows.

"There, that's Pashka Bukamashkin," said Sanka, backing away.

In front of us was the mill. A cart stood nearby, and under the cart lay a pup with burrs in his fuzzy fur. The pup had one eye open and was watching the busy little sparrows pecking at the grains of wheat scattered over the sand. And there, on the sand, sat Pashka Bukamashkin, shirtless, chewing on a cucumber.

The sight of us did not frighten Pashka. He threw the end of his cucumber to the pup and said, without looking at anyone in particular:

"Sic 'im, Rambler! Here comes that notorious fascist, the Whiteguard Sanka. You just wait,

you miserable fascist. We'll get even with you yet."

And Pashka spat expertly into the sand quite a distance away. The fuzzy pup growled. The frightened sparrows flew noisily up into a tree. But at these words Svetlana and I came up closer to Pashka.

"Hold on there, Pashka," I said. "Maybe you're mistaken. He's no fascist or Whiteguard. He's just Sanka Karyakin, and he lives near the house with the tomato patch that somebody's pigs got into."

"All the same he's a Whiteguard," Pashka insisted. "If you don't believe me, I can tell you the whole story if you want."

Naturally, Svetlana and I wanted very much to hear the whole story. So we sat down on a pile of logs opposite Pashka. The fuzzy pup settled itself on the grass at our feet. But Sanka would not sit down. He went behind the cart and called out angrily:

"Then tell them the whole story. About how I got hit on the head, too. Think it didn't hurt? Just try it yourself and see!"

\*

"There's a town in Germany," Pashka began calmly, "called Dresden. A worker, a Jew, ran away from the fascists of that town. He ran

away and came here. And a little girl named Bertha came with him. Now he's working at this mill, and Bertha plays with us. Only she went to the village a little while ago for milk. Anyway, the day before yesterday we were playing tipcat — Bertha, that fellow Sanka over there, another boy, and I. Bertha batted the cat and it hit that Sanka fellow in the back of the head. . . ."

"Hit me right on top of the head," Sanka called out from behind the cart. "I saw stars, and all she did was laugh."

"Well," continued Pashka, "she hit that Sanka fellow on the top of the head with the cat. He wanted to punch her, but then he cooled off. He stuck a burdock leaf on his head and began to play again. And that's when he started to cheat. He got too close to the cat and aimed it right at the stake."

"That's a lie!" cried Sanka, jumping out from behind the cart. "Your dog pushed the cat with his nose and it rolled right up to the stake."

"But you were playing with us and not with the dog. You could have put the cat back in its place. Well, he threw the cat and Bertha slammed it right into the nettles at the other end of the field. We all thought it was funny, but Sanka got mad. Naturally he didn't like to hunt for the cat in those nettles. So he climbed over the fence and yelled, 'You're a fool and a kike! I hope you

go back to your old Germany!' Bertha knows enough Russian to understand 'fool,' but she couldn't make out 'kike.' So she asked me, 'What does kike mean?' I didn't have the heart to tell her. I yelled to Sanka to shlt up, but he shouted louder and louder just for spite. Then I jumped over the fence and went after him, but he hid in the bushes. When I came back Bertha's bat was lying on the grass and Bertha was sitting in the corner on some logs. I called her, but she wouldn't answer. Then I walked over and saw that she was crying. She must have guessed what the word means. I picked up a stone and put it in my pocket. 'You just wait, Sanka, my boy,' I thought. 'This isn't Germany. We'll deal with your fascism ourselves.' "

Svetlana and I looked at Sanka. "Well, brother," we thought, "that's a nasty business. It made us sick at our stomach to listen to it. And we were going to stick up for you."

Just as I was about to tell him this the mill suddenly came to life with a clatter. The water began to turn the wheel. A frightened cat all coated with flour shot out of the mill window and landed on Rambler's back. Rambler, who had been dozing, squealed and leapt into the air. The cat scrambled up a tree and sent the sparrows flying to the mill roof. The horse tossed its head and jerked the cart. Just then a tousled man,

grey with flour, stuck his head out of the shed, and, catching sight of Sanka jumping away from the cart, threatened him with a long whip.

"Hey you — watch out or I'll give you a good licking!"

Svetlana burst out laughing. Then she felt sorry for poor Sanka, whom everybody wanted to hit.

"Daddy," she said, "maybe he's not such a fascist, after all? Maybe he's just a fool?" She looked tenderly into Sanka's face.

In reply Sanka snorted angrily, shook his head, sniffed, and opened his mouth to say something. But what could he say, when he was guilty through and through, and there really was nothing to say?

Just then Pashka's pup stopped barking at the cat. He turned his head toward the field and pricked up his ears.

A rifle shot sounded beyond the grove. A second followed. Then came more and more.

"A battle!" cried Pashka.

"A battle!" I reiterated. "Those are rifle shots. And there goes a machine gun — hear it?"

"But who's fighting whom?" Svetlana asked in a quivering voice. "Is it war already?"

Pashka jumped up first and made for the woods, with the pup at his heels. I caught Svetlana up in my arms and followed him.

We had not gone halfway when we heard someone shouting behind us. Turning, we saw Sanka running toward us straight across the field. He was leaping over ditches and mounds and holding his hands high over his head to attract our attention.

"Just like a goat!" Pashka muttered. "What's that fool waving in his hand?"

"He's not a fool. He's bringing my sandals!" Svetlana cried joyfully. "I forgot them on the logs and he found them and is bringing them to me. You ought to make up with him, Pashka!"

Pashka scowled and said nothing. We waited for Sanka to bring up Svetlana's tan sandals. Then there were four of us, plus the pup, marching through the grove.

When we reached the edge of the grove we saw a rolling field overgrown with bushes. Near a creek a goat tied to a stake tinkled his beli as he nibbled at the grass. A solitary hawk wheeled in the sky. And that was all. There was nobody else and nothing else in that field.

"Where's the war?" Svetlana inquired impatiently.

"I'll take a look and see," said Pashka, climbing up on a tree stump.

He stood there for a long time, squinting in the sun and shading his eyes with his hand. Goodness knows what he saw there, but Svetlana soon grew tired of waiting. She wandered off in the tall grass to look for the war herself.

"The grass is too high, and I'm too small," she complained standing up on her toes. "I can't see a thing."

"Watch your step or you'll trip on the wire," came a loud voice from above.

Pashka tumbled off his tree stump. Sanka jumped aside violently. And Svetlana rushed up to me and clutched my hand.

We backed away, looked up, and above us we saw a Red Army man hiding in the leafy branches of a lone tree.

A rifle hung on a branch by his side. In one hand he held a telephone receiver, and he was scanning the edge of the empty field through shiny black binoculars.

Before we could utter a word, a thunderous gun salvo rolled and rumbled in the distance. The earth shook underfoot. A cloud of black dust and smoke rose over the far end of the field.

The frenzied goat tugged and wrenched itself free of its rope. With a swift flapping of its wings the hawk soared up into the sky and flew off.

"The fascists are in for it!" cried Pashka, with a glance at Sanka. "See how our guns fire!"

"The fascists are in for it," echoed a hoarse voice.

Only then did we notice a grey-haired old man standing behind a bush.

He had a long beard and broad shoulders, and he held a heavy, gnarled club. A big shaggy dog stood at his feet, baring his fangs at Pashka's Rambler, whose tail was between his legs.

The old man raised a broad-rimmed straw hat and made a courtly bow first to Svetlana and then to the rest of us. Then he placed his club on the grass, took out a curved pipe, filled it and lit up.

He took a long time lighting up, now pressing the tobacco down with his thumb, now stirring it up with a nail, as though he were raking the coals of a fire.

Finally he was satisfied, and began to puff and smoke so hard that the Red Army man in the tree gave a sneeze and a cough.

The gun spoke up again, and suddenly the empty, quiet fields came to life. Red Army men jumped out of ditches and from behind bushes and mounds and hillocks with their rifles at the ready.

They ran, they leapt, they fell, and they rose again. Their ranks deployed, converged and swelled; finally, with shouts and yells, the whole avalanche went into a bayonet charge against the

summit of a mound that was still partly enveloped in dust and smoke.

Then everything became still. A signalman, who looked like a toy soldier from where we stood, appeared on the summit and waved his flags. A bugle tapped out a shrill "all clear." The observer climbed down the tree, breaking branches with his heavy boots. He patted Svetlana on the head and slipped three shiny acorns into her palm. Then he ran off, rolling the thin telephone wire on his reel as he went.

The manoeuvres were over.

"Well, did you see that?" Pashka asked Sanka challengingly as he nudged him in the ribs. "Talk about being hit in the head with a cat. Here you can get your crown knocked clean off."

"What's this I hear?" asked the bearded old man, approaching us. "I'm sixty years old, but it seems I haven't developed any brains. I don't understand a thing. Over there, at the foot of yonder hill, lies our collective farm, the *Daybreak*. These are our fields all around, our oats, buckwheat, millet and wheat. That's our new mill over by the river. And the big apiary in the grove is ours too. And I'm the head watchman over all that. I've seen all sorts of scoundrels in my time — I've even caught horse thieves — but I've never yet seen a fascist on the land in my charge. No, never before. Come

here, Sanka, you holy terror, and let me have a look at you. But wait a minute, wait a minute: first stop drooling and wipe your nose. Otherwise I can't even look at you."

The sarcastic old man said all this unhurriedly. Then he shot a curious glance from under his bushy eyebrows at the round-eyed Sanka.

"That's not true!" Sanka cried in a hurt voice, sniffing. "I'm not a fascist, I'm Soviet through and through. And that girl Bertha stopped being angry at me long ago. She bit off more than half of my apple yesterday, so there! And that Pashka's been setting all the boys against me. He should talk, when he went and swiped my spring! If I'm a fascist, then my spring's fascist too. But he went and made a swing out of it for his dog. I asked him to make up with me, but he said, 'First I'll lick you and then we can make up.'"

"You must make up without fighting," said Svetlana with conviction. "You must hook your little fingers, spit on the ground and say, 'Quarrels go the other way, peace is coming here today.' Now hook your little fingers. And you tell your big bad dog to stop scaring our little Rambler, Comrade Head Watchman."

"Back, Rex!" ordered the watchman. "Down! And don't touch our friends!"

"Oh, so that's who he is! So this is Rex the Giant, with the long fur and the sharp teeth!"

Svetlana stood very still for a few moments. Then she shifted her feet uncertainly and approached the dog.

"I'm a friend too, and you mustn't touch friends!" she said, shaking her finger at the dog.

Rex cocked his head at her. He saw that Svetlana's eyes were clear and that her hands smelled of grass and flowers. And so he smiled at her and wagged his tail.

Sanka and Pashka became jealous. They moved up closer to the dog and said:

"We're friends too, and you mustn't touch friends! Rex sniffed at them suspiciously: perhaps these sly boys smelled of carrots from the collective farm vegetable garden? But just then, as though on purpose, a frisky colt galloped past, raising the dust. Rex sneezed before he had a chance to make up his mind about the boys. He did not touch them, but neither did he wag his tail or let them pet him.

"It's time we were off," I said with a start. "The sun is high and soon it will be noon. How hot it is!"

"Goodbye everybody!" Svetlana sang. "We're going far, far away again."

"Goodbye!" chorused the boys, who were friends once more. "Come and visit us again from your far, far away."

"Goodbye," said the watchman, his eyes smiling. "I don't know where you are going and what you are looking for, but I can tell you that the worst far, far away I know is the old village cemetery over there on the left, by the river. And the best far, far away is the big pine forest beyond the lake. To get there you must turn to the right, cross the meadow and the stone quarries, and then go through a grove and around a swamp. In that pine forest there are mushrooms and flowers and raspberries. And there's a house on the bank of the river. My daughter Valentina and her son Fyodor live in that house. If you happen by, give them my regards."

The queer old man raised his hat, whistled to his dog, puffed at his pipe, and, leaving a thick wide trail of smoke behind him, walked off toward a yellow pea patch.

Svetlana looked at me and I looked at her. What did we want with the gloomy old cemetery! We locked hands and turned to the right, to the best far, far away.

We crossed the meadow and descended into the quarries.

There we saw men digging sugar-white stones out of deep black pits. Wheels were turning and little cars were screeching. More and more cars were being loaded and more and more stones were being heaped up.

It seems that lots of all kinds of stones are hidden under the ground.

Svetlana wanted to have a look into the ground. For a long time she lay on her belly, peering down a black pit. And when I finally pulled her away by the legs, she told me that at first she had seen nothing but blackness. Then she saw a black sea and something moving in it with a rumbling noise — most likely a double-tailed shark, with one tail in front and the other in back. And she also saw a Dragon with three hundred and twenty-five legs. And one gold eye. And the Dragon was sitting there and roaring.

I gave Svetlana a sly look and asked her whether she hadn't also seen a boat with two funnels, a grey monkey on a tree and a Polar bear on an ice floe.

Svetlana reflected. Why yes, she had seen all that too!

I wagged my finger at her. Was she quite sure she was not making it up? In reply she burst into laughter and ran off as quick as her little legs would take her.

We walked and walked, stopping frequently to rest and pick flowers. When we got tired of carrying the bouquets, we left them behind on the road.

I threw a bouquet into the lap of an old woman sitting in a cart. At first the old woman took fright and shook her fist at us. But when

she saw what it was, she smiled and threw us three big cucumbers.

We picked up the cucumbers, wiped them and put them in the knapsack. Then we continued merrily on our way.

Soon we came to a little village in which lived people who plough the land and sow it to grain, potatoes, cabbage and beets, and work in the orchards and vegetable gardens.

Beyond the village we passed green grave mounds where those who had done with their sowing and work were now lying at rest.

We saw a tree that had been shattered by lightning.

We came upon a drove of horses, each of which was good enough for Budyonny \* himself.

Then the sky turned dark and we grew anxious. Clouds had come creeping up from all sides; they had surrounded the sun, caught it and blotted it out. But the sun kept peeping stubbornly first through one gap and then through another, until finally it fought its way clear and shone hotter and brighter than ever over the enormous earth.

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\* Semyon Budyonny (born in 1883) — hero of the Civil War, and gifted leader of the Soviet Army; he commanded the First Cavalry Army and won a series of important victories over the Whiteguard troops. S. Budyonny is now a Marshal of the Soviet Union.

Our grey house with its wooden roof was far behind.

Marusya must have returned long ago. She must have looked around for us — but we were not there! And now she must be sitting and waiting for us, our silly Marusya!

"Daddy!" said Svetlana, tired at last. "Let's sit down somewhere and have something to eat."

We began to look around and we discovered a glade the like of which few are given to find.

The luxuriant boughs of a wild nut tree rustled invitingly. A young silver fir pointed its crest at the sky. And thousands of aromatic flowers, brighter than the flags on May Day — blue, red, turquoise and purple — clustered motionless round the fir.

Even the birds dared not sing in that clearing — so still was it there.

But a stupid grey crow flying by settled heavily on a branch, glanced around, and seeing that it had come to the wrong place, croaked in surprise and flew off at once to its foul garbage dump.

"Sit down, Svetlana, and watch the knapsack while I go fill the canteen with water. Don't be afraid — there are no animals here but the long-eared hare."

"I'm not afraid of even a thousand hares!" Svetlana replied bravely. "But just the same come back as soon as you can."

The creek was some distance away; and I began to worry about Svetlana as I made my way back.

But Svetlana was not frightened. And she was not crying. She was singing.

I hid behind a bush and watched my chubby little red-headed Svetlana standing in front of flowers which reached to her shoulder, singing this song she had just made up:

*Hey! hey!*

*We didn't break the blue cup.*

*No, no!*

*The watchman is making his rounds of  
the fields,*

*But we didn't take any carrots away.*

*I didn't take any, he didn't take any.*

*Sanka, it's true, took ever so few.*

*Hey! Hey!*

*Into the fields the Red Army is marching,  
Coming back from the neighbouring town.*

*The Red Army is reddest of all,*

*The White Army is whitest of all.*

*Boom! Boom! Tat-a-tat tat!*

*Here come the drummer boys*

*Here come the pilots!*

*Drummer boys in aeroplanes that fly in  
the sky,*

*And me, a little drummer girl, standing  
here below.*

The tall flowers listened to the song in solemn silence, and when she had finished they nodded their lovely heads to her.

"Come here, you little drummer!" I called out, spreading apart a bush. "I have some cold water, red apples, white bread and yellow cookies. Nothing is too good for a song like that."

Svetlana blushed faintly. She shook her head in reproach, narrowed her eyes and, the very image of Marusya, said:

"Hid and eavesdropped you did! Fie on you, dear comrade!"

Svetlana suddenly grew very quiet and thoughtful.

While we were eating, a grey siskin alighted on a branch and began to chirp.

It was a brave siskin. It hopped about on the branch opposite us and chirped and did not think of flying off.

"I know that siskin," Svetlana said with conviction. "I saw it when Mummie and I were swinging in the garden. Mummie swung me up ever so high. Twit-too-it! Why has it followed us so far?"

"No, no!" I replied firmly. "This is quite a different siskin. You are mistaken, Svetlana. That siskin had a few feathers missing in its tail — the landlady's one-eyed cat plucked them

out. And it was fatter and chirped in an entirely different key."

"No, it's the same one," Svetlana said stubbornly. "I know. It followed us all the way."

"Hey, hey!" I sang in a sad, low voice. "But we didn't break the blue cup. And we've decided to go far, far away, forever."

The grey siskin chirped crossly. Not a flower among the whole million swayed or nodded its head. Svetlana frowned.

"Your voice is all wrong," she said sharply. "People don't sing like that. That's the way bears sing."

We packed our knapsack in silence and left the grove. And lo, at the foot of a hill I saw a cool blue river glittering in the sun. What luck!

I raised Svetlana in my arms. When she caught sight of the sandy bank and the green islets, she forgot all about everything and, clapping her hands, shouted:

"Let's go swimming! Let's go swimming! Let's go swimming!"

\*

We cut straight across a damp meadow.

Soon we came to a dense, swampy thicket. We did not feel like turning back, and so we

decided to thresh our way through somehow. But the farther we went the denser became the swamp.

We circled about, turned this way and that, trod over squelching boards, and jumped from mound to mound. Soon we were soaked and spattered with mud, but we could find no way out.

Somewhere nearby, beyond the bushes, a herd of cows was lowing. The herder cracked his whip, and his dog, scenting us, barked angrily. But all we could see was the reddish swamp water and rotting bushes and sedge.

Svetlana's freckled face grew cloudy with anxiety. She turned more and more often to look at me with silent reproach. "What's this, Daddy?" she seemed to be saying. "You're so big and strong, and look what's happened to us!"

"You wait here and don't budge!" I said, putting her down on a dry bit of ground.

I plunged into a thicket, only to find nothing but green mud and lush swamp flowers.

I turned back. Svetlana was not standing where I had put her, but was picking her way gingerly toward me, clutching at bushes for support.

"Stay where I put you!" I shouted.

Svetlana stopped. Her eyes blinked rapidly and her lips trembled.

"Why are you shouting?" she asked in a soft, unsteady voice. "I'm barefoot, and there's frogs back there. I'm scared."

My heart bled for little Svetlana, who had come to grief on my account.

"Here, take this stick!" I called back, "and hit the nasty frogs with it! Only stay where you are. We'll get out of this soon."

I went back into the thicket, furious with myself. What was this? Could this miserable bog compare with the boundless Dnieper rushes, or the gloomy Akhtyrka everglades where we crushed Wrangel's White troops?

I advanced from mound to mound, from bush to bush. A step — and I found myself up to the waist in water. Another step, and a dry aspen snapped and fell, followed by a mouldy log. A rotten tree stump plopped into the mud. Now there was something to stand on. Then another puddle. And finally dry ground.

Spreading apart a clump of reeds, I came upon a goat, which jumped in fright at my sudden appearance.

"Halloo! Svetlana!" I shouted: "Are you there?"

"Halloo!" came a thin and mournful little voice. "I'm he-e-re!"

Finally we reached the river. We cleaned off the mud that covered us and then rinsed our clothes. And while they were drying on the hot sand, we went in for a swim.

All the fishes darted away in terror to their deep retreats as we laughed and churned up the sparkling water into fountains.

A black bewhiskered crab that I had pulled up out of its submarine home rolled its round eyes and jumped and twitched in fright. Probably it had never before seen such an unbearably hot sun and such an unbelievably red-headed little girl.

Biding his time, he suddenly dug his claws viciously into Svetlana's finger.

Svetlana screamed and hurled him into the middle of a flock of geese. The stupid fat geese scattered with a great commotion.

Then an old grey goose edged up to the crab. He had seen plenty of things more frightening than a crab. He cocked his head, regarded the crab with one eye, then snap — and the crab met his doom.

\*

Having swum our fill, we dried ourselves in the sun, dressed and went on.

Again we met all sorts of things on our way: people, and horses, and carts, and machines,

and even a grey hedgehog, which we picked up and carried along with us. But it soon pricked our fingers and we threw it into a cold creek.

The hedgehog snorted and swam off to the other bank, "The very idea!" it must have been thinking. "How can I ever find my hole now?"

At last we reached the lake.

Here the last field of the *Day break* Collective Farm ended, and the *Red Dawn* lands began.

A log house stood at the edge of the forest. We guessed at once that this was the home of the watchman's daughter Valentina and her son Fyodor.

We went up to the fence, where tall sunflowers stood guard over the house like sentries.

Valentina herself was standing on the porch facing the garden. She was tall and broad-shouldered, like her father, the watchman. The collar of her blue blouse was unbuttoned. In one hand she held a mop, and in the other a wet dust rag.

"Fyodor, you naughty child!" she cried sternly. "Where have you put the grey pot?"

"Over there!" a grave voice answered from under a raspberry bush, and flaxen-haired Fyodor pointed to a puddle in which the pot, loaded with sticks and grass, was floating.

"And where did you hide the sifter, you shameless creature?"

"Over there!" came Fyodor's grave voice, and he pointed to the sifter, which was held down by a stone and under which something was moving.

"You just wait, you little pirate! When you come in I'll fan your backside with a wet rag," threatened Valentina. Then catching sight of us, she straightened out her skirt.

"Hello," I said. "Your father sends you his regards."

"Thanks," she replied. "Come into the garden and have a rest."

We passed through the gate and lay down under a ripe apple tree.

Chubby Fyodor was dressed in nothing but a shirt. His wet, mud-stained pants lay on the grass.

"I'm eating ras'berries," he told us gravely. "I've eaten two bushes up, and I'll eat another one."

"Go on eating them, kid," I said. "Only see you don't burst."

Fyodor stopped in his tracks, prodded his belly with his fist, cast an angry glance at me, and, snatching up his pants, waddled off to the house.

We lay for a long time in silence. I thought that Svetlana had fallen asleep. But when I turned to her I saw that she was not sleeping; with bated breath she was watching a silver butterfly creeping up the sleeve of her pink frock.

Suddenly the air shook with a mighty rumbling, and a shiny airplane swept over the tops of the apple trees.

Svetlana started, the butterfly flitted away, a yellow cock flew off the fence, and a frightened jackdaw cawed as it streaked across the sky. Then all was still.

"That's the same flyer who came to our house yesterday," said Svetlana with a pout.

"Why the same?" I asked, raising my head. "Maybe it's an entirely different flyer."

"No, it's the same one. I heard him tell Mummie he would fly far, far away next day, for good. I was eating a red tomato, and Mummie said, 'Well, goodbye and good luck!'"

Then Svetlana climbed onto my stomach. "Daddy," she said, "tell me about Mummie. F'rinstance, about how things were when I wasn't here yet."

"How things were? Why, just the same as now. At first there was day, and then there was night, and then day came again, and then night followed...."

"And a thousand more days!" Svetlana interrupted impatiently. "But tell me what happened during those days. You know very well what happened, you're only pretending you don't."

"All right, I'll tell you about it. Only first get off my stomach, because it's hard to talk with you on top of me. Now, listen!"

\*

"Our Marusya was seventeen years old at the time. The Whites captured her town and threw her father into prison. Her mother had died long before, so our Marusya was left all alone."

"Ooh, how sorry I feel for her!" said Svetlana, moving up closer to me. "Well, go on."

"Marusya threw on her shawl and ran out into the street. There she saw the White soldiers taking workingmen and workingwomen to prison. The rich people, naturally, were very happy to have the Whites in town, and their houses were all lit up and music was playing. Marusya had nowhere to go and no one to tell her sad story to."

"Ooh, how terribly sorry I feel for her!" Svetlana interrupted. "Daddy," she said impatiently, "hurry up and tell me about the Reds."

"Our Marusya then left the town. The moon was shining and the wind was blowing. She soon reached the broad steppe."

"Were there wolves?"

"No, no wolves. The wolves had all run away to the woods because of the gunfire in the steppe. Marusya then thought to herself: 'I'll cross the steppe and make my way to the town of Belgorod. Voroshilov's Red Army is there. They say he's a very brave man. If I ask him, maybe he'll help me.'

"But what our foolish Marusya did not know was that the Red Army never waited until it was asked. It hurried to the rescue wherever the Whites were attacking. Our Red Army detachments were already moving across the steppe, not far from where Marusya stood. Each man's rifle was loaded with five bullets, and each machine gun with two hundred and fifty bullets.

"I was riding the steppe on patrol duty. Suddenly a shadow flickered over the ground and disappeared behind a mound. 'Aha!' I thought. 'A White scout. That's as far as you'll get!'

"I spurred my horse and rode behind the mound. And what do you think I found there? A White scout? No! It was a young girl standing in the moonlight. Her face was in the

shade, but I could see her hair flying in the wind.

"I jumped off my horse, but held my revolver ready just in case. Then I said, 'Who are you and why are you running about the steppe at midnight?'

"The moon was a hu-uge, huge one. When the girl saw the Red Army star on my fur cap, she fell on my neck and began to cry.

"That's how I met Marusya.

"That very night we drove the Whites out of the town. We opened the prisons and let the workers out.

"Then a bullet got me in the chest and I was put in hospital. My shoulder hurt too — when I fell off my horse I hit it against a rock.

"The commander of my squadron came to see me. 'Well, goodbye,' he said. 'We're going on after the Whites. Here's some tobacco and paper from your comrades. Take care of yourself and get well quick.'

"The day passed and evening came. My chest hurt and my shoulder ached. I felt dreadfully lonesome. It's very dull, Svetlana dear, without one's comrades.

"Suddenly the door opened and Marusya slipped in on tiptoe. I actually shouted — I was so glad to see her.

"Marusya sat down by my side. She put her hand on my burning head and said:

"'I've been hunting for you all day long, ever since the fighting ended. Does it hurt, dear?'

"'It doesn't matter a bit, Marusya,' I replied. 'Why are you so pale?'

"'You go to sleep,' said Marusya, 'and sleep well. I'll stay with you and see you through.'

"That's how Marusya and I met for the second time, and we've been together ever since."

\*

"Daddy," Svetlana said in a tremulous voice. "We haven't left home for good, have we? Because Mummie loves us. We'll only walk a little while longer, and then we'll go back. All right?"

"How do you know she loves us? Maybe she loves you, but she doesn't love me any more."

"Ooh, that's a fib!" Svetlana shook her head. "When I woke up last night I saw Mummie put her book away and look at you a long, long time."

"What of it! She looks out of the window too, and looks at everybody. That's what she has eyes for."

"Oh, no!" Svetlana protested with conviction. "When you're looking out of the window it's altogether different. Like this...."

Svetlana lifted her thin eyebrows, cocked her head, compressed her lips and glanced with complete indifference at a rooster strutting by.

"But when you're in love it's like this."

Svetlana's blue eyes shone with a dazzling light, her lowered eyelids fluttered, and Marusya's lovely, pensive gaze fell on my face.

"Oh, you little pirate!" I cried, catching Svetlana up in my arms. "And how did you look at me yesterday when you spilled the ink?"

"But you chased me out of the room. And people who are chased out always look angry."

\*

We hadn't broken the blue cup. Maybe Marusya broke it herself. But we had forgiven her. People sometimes couldn't help thinking bad of others. Once Svetlana had thought bad of me. And hadn't I myself thought bad of Marusya? I sought out Valentina and asked her if there was a short cut to our house.

"My husband is driving to the station soon," Valentina said. "He can take you to the mill; you won't have far to go from there."

Returning to the garden, I came upon Svetlana near the porch. She was looking very abashed.

"Daddy," she informed me in a mysterious whisper. "That little boy Fyodor came out of the raspberry bushes and is stealing cookies from your knapsack."

We went over to the apple tree, but the sly Fyodor caught sight of us in time and hid in a clump of burdocks growing by the fence.

"Fyodor!" I called. "Come here, don't be afraid."

The tops of the burdocks swayed. It was clear that Fyodor was departing in no uncertain haste.

"Fyodor!" I called again. "Come here. I'll give you all the cookies."

The burdocks stopped swaying, and soon a heavy puffing issued from the clump.

"I'm standing here," came his angry voice at last. "I haven't any pants on and there's nettles all around."

Then, like a giant striding over a forest, I stepped into the burdocks, extracted the stern Fyodor and poured the contents of the knapsack out before him.

He stored the cookies unhurriedly away into his shirt, and, without even saying "Thank you," stalked off to the other end of the garden.

"My, how stuck up he is," Svetlana remarked disapprovingly. "Took off his pants and struts about like a king."

A cart drawn by two horses rolled up to the house and Valentina came out onto the porch.

"There you are. They're good horses; they'll get you there in no time."

Fyodor appeared once more, this time in pants. He hurried toward us, dragging a pretty smoky-grey kitten by the scruff of the neck. The kitten must have been used to such treatment, for it did not squirm or mew, but only swished its fluffy little tail half-heartedly.

"Here!" said Fyodor. He thrust the kitten into Svetlana's arms.

"For good?" Svetlana exclaimed with delight, glancing uncertainly at me.

"Take it if you want it," offered Valentina. "We have plenty of that sort of thing here. Fyodor! Why did you hide the cookies in the cabbage patch? I saw you through the window."

"I'll go hide them in a better place," Fyodor informed her. And he waddled off like a dignified bear cub.

"Just like his grandad," smiled Valentina. "Such a big fellow. And he's only four years old."

We drove along a broad smooth road. Dusk was falling. We met people going home from work. They were tired but merry.

A collective farm truck sputtered as it drove into a garage.

An army bugle blew in the field.

A gong rang out in the village.

A big, big locomotive toot-tooted beyond the woods. Turn, you wheels. Hurry, you cars. The road of rails stretches a long, long way.

Hugging the fluffy kitten tight, happy Svetlana sang this song to the clicking of the cart wheels:

*Hum! Hum!*  
*Here they come!*  
*The little mice*  
*With little tails*  
*And naughty eyes,*  
*They crawl everywhere.*  
*They crawl on the shelf.*  
*Crash! Bang!*  
*There goes a cup!*  
*And who is to blame?*  
*Why, no one's to blame.*  
*Only the mice*  
*From the little black holes.*  
*"Good day, little mice!*  
*We are back again.*

*And what is this  
We have brought with us?  
It meows  
And it jumps,  
And drinks milk from a saucer.  
You had better get back  
In your little black holes,  
Or you'll be torn apart  
Into pieces.  
Into ten pieces,  
Into twenty pieces,  
Into a hundred million  
Raggedy pieces.*

The cart drew up to the mill and we jumped out.

We could hear Pashka Bukamashkin, Sanka, Bertha and someone else playing at tipcat behind the fence.

"Don't cheat!" Sanka was shouting at Bertha. "You told on me and now you're stepping up yourself."

"Someone's stepping up again," Svetlana explained. "I suppose they'll begin quarreling again." Then she added with a sigh, "What can you do — it's that kind of game!"

As we approached the house we were gripped by excitement. There was one more corner to turn and a hill to climb.

Suddenly we stopped short and looked at each other in disbelief.

We could not yet see our rickety fence or the high porch, but we could see the wooden roof of our grey house. And there was our lovely, sparkling whirligig buzzing away merrily.

"Mummie climbed up on the roof herself!" squealed Svetlana, tugging impatiently at my hand.

We climbed the hill.

The orange rays of the evening sun lit up the porch. There, in a red dress and sandals on her bare feet, stood our Marusya. She was smiling.

"Laugh, laugh!" Svetlana cried, running up to her. "We've forgiven you anyway."

I walked up to Marusya and looked into her face.

Marusya's brown eyes shone with a tender light. We could see that she had been waiting for us a long time and that she was very glad we had come home.

"No," I decided resolutely, kicking away the fragments of the blue cup. "It was the bad grey mice that did it. We didn't break it. And Marusya didn't break it either."

\*

And then it was evening, with a moon and stars.

The three of us sat for a long time in the garden, under the ripe cherry tree, and Marusya told us where she had been, and what she had done, and what she had seen.

And Svetlana's story would have lasted till midnight had not Marusya remembered the time and sent her packing to bed.

"Well, what do you say?" sly little Svetlana asked me as she carried the drowsy kitten away with her. "Is our life so sad now?"

We stood up too.

A golden moon was shining over our garden.

A distant train chugged away to the North.

A midnight flyer zoomed overhead and vanished into the clouds.

And life, comrades, life was altogether grand!

# TIMUR *AND HIS* SQUAD



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**C**OLONEL Alexandrov, commander of an armoured unit, had left home all of three months ago. He was most likely at the front.\* In the middle of the summer he sent a wire home advising his daughters Olga and Genie to spend the rest of their vacation in the countryside near Moscow.

Genie pushed her print kerchief farther back on her head and leaned on her broomstick, frowning as Olga said:

"I'm going off with the baggage and you clean up the apartment. It's no use frowning and biting your lips. And be sure to lock the door. Return the books to the library. Don't visit your girl friends but go straight to the station. When you get there send this wire to Dad. Then take the train out to the country. Eugenia, you must listen to me. After all, I'm your sister...."

---

\* This refers to the hostilities near Halhin-Gol, in the Far East, in the spring and summer of 1939. The Japanese militarists attacked the Mongolian People's Republic, and the Red Army came to her assistance.  
— *Trans.*

"So am I."

"Quite right, but I'm older than you — and besides, it's Dad's orders."

When the truck had roared out of the yard, Genie heaved a sigh and glanced around the room. Complete disorder met her eyes. She went up to the dusty mirror which reflected her father's portrait on the opposite wall.

Very well! Granted that Olga was older and had to be obeyed, but then she, Genie, had her father's nose and mouth and eyebrows. And she had most likely inherited his character too.

She tightened the knot of her kerchief, kicked off her sandals and picked up a dust cloth. Then she whisked the cloth off the table, set a pail under the faucet, grabbed the broom and swept a pile of rubbish toward the door.

Soon the oil stove was spluttering and the Primus buzzing away. The floor was flooded with water. Soapsuds frothed in the zinc washtub.

And outside passers-by gaped up at a bare-foot little girl in a red smock standing fearlessly on a third-floor windowsill cleaning a wide-open window.

\*

The truck sped along the broad, sunlit road. Olga sat on top in a wicker chair, resting

her feet on a suitcase and leaning against a soft bundle. On her lap a reddish-brown kitten was playing with a bouquet of cornflowers.

At the 20th milepost they were overtaken by a Red Army motorized column. The soldiers, who sat in rows on wooden benches, the muzzles of their rifles pointed skyward, were singing in unison.

At the sound of the singing the doors and windows of cottages were thrown wide open. Laughing children tumbled out over fences and through gates. They waved to the men, cheered, and threw them half-ripe apples. Then they immediately began to play soldiers, slashing at the grass and nettles in swift cavalry charges.

The truck turned down a country lane and came to a stop in front of a small cottage with ivy-covered walls. The driver and his assistant let down the sideboards and began to unload. Olga opened the door of the glassed-in porch.

From here one had a view of a rambling, neglected garden. At the farther end of the garden stood a ramshackle two-storey barn flying a small red flag.

When Olga returned to the truck, a spry old lady who lived next door and sold milk popped up at her elbow. She offered to wash the windows and floor of the cottage.

While the neighbour was fussing about with

pick out the tune of a song she had recently heard:

*Ah, if again I could see you once,  
Once again look into your eyes!  
Ah, if again I could see you once —  
Or twice —  
Or thrice —  
But you, as you speed away,  
Cannot know what it means to stay,  
Waiting each night and day —  
Ah!  
Pilots, Bombardiers!  
Flying cavaliers!  
Winging through the heavens  
Over land and sea.  
When will you return?  
You may linger long,  
But be sure to come,  
Whenever that may be.*

As she sang Olga glanced up warily now and then at a dark clump of bushes near the fence.

Then she rose abruptly, faced the bushes and said in a loud voice:

"Look here! What are you hiding for and what do you want?"

A man in white flannels emerged from behind the bushes. He inclined his head and replied courteously:

"I'm not hiding. I'm a bit of a singer myself. I didn't want to interfere with your playing so I stood and listened."

"Yes, but you could have stood and listened in the street. Why did you have to climb over the fence?"

"Me? Climb over the fence?" The man was obviously offended. "I beg your pardon, but I'm not a tomcat. There's a gap in the corner of the fence over there, and I squeezed through it."

"I see," said Olga with a smile. "There's the gate. Be good enough to squeeze back into the street through that."

The man did as he was told. Without a word he walked through the gate and bolted it behind him. This pleased Olga.

"Just a moment!" she called, coming down the steps. "Did you say you were a singer?"

"No," he replied. "I'm a mechanical engineer, but in my spare time I act in the opera troupe at our plant."

"I say," Olga suddenly suggested in a casual tone. "Do you mind seeing me to the station? I'm expecting my little sister. It's quite late and dark already and there's no sign of her. I'm not afraid, but I don't know my way around here. Whatever are you opening the gate for? You can wait for me by the fence."

She put the accordion away, threw a shawl over her shoulders and stepped out into the dark street that was scented with dew and flowers.

\*

Olga hardly spoke to her companion because she was angry at Genie. He told her his name was George Garayev and that he was a mechanical engineer at an auto plant.

Two trains went by, and still no Genie. Then the third and last train came and went.

"The worry that wicked child causes me!" Olga exclaimed. "If I were forty, or at least thirty, then it would be different. But she's thirteen and I'm eighteen, and she just won't listen to me."

"No need to be forty!" George said firmly. "Eighteen's more like it! And there's nothing to worry about; your sister'll come early tomorrow morning."

The platform emptied out. George produced his cigarette case, and at once two tough-looking youngsters swaggered up to him, cigarettes in hand, and stood waiting for a light.

"Young man," said George, striking a match and holding it close to the older boy's face. "Before you come up to me with a cigarette you ought to introduce yourself. I've already had the honour of making your acquaintance in the park

where you were so diligently pulling a board out of a new fence. Your name's Mikhail Kvakin, isn't it?"

The boy snorted and backed away. George blew out the match and offered Olga his arm to walk her home.

When they were out of earshot the second boy stuck his soiled butt behind his ear and drawled:

"Where'd that propagandist pop up from? He from hereabouts?"

"Yeah," Kvakin said wryly. "That's Timur Garayev's uncle. We ought to get hold of Timur and beat him up. He's gone and got a gang together and it looks like they're out to get us."

Just then the boys caught sight of a staid old gentleman walking past the lamppost at the end of the platform. Leaning on his stick, he walked down the steps.

This was Doctor F. G. Kolokolchikov, a local resident. They rushed after him and asked loudly for matches. The old gentleman did not seem to like their looks or their manners, for he turned around and brandished his gnarled stick at them. Then he continued sedately on his way.

\*

Genie did not have time to send the wire to her father from the station in Moscow, so when

she got off the suburban train she decided to find the local post office.

She sauntered through an old park, gathering bluebells, and did not notice how she came out to a crossroads with gardens on either side. The deserted appearance of the place clearly indicated that she had lost her way.

She caught sight of a lively little girl pulling a stubborn goat by the horns and heaping abuse on its head.

"Girlie, will you please tell me the way to the post office?" Genie called out to her.

But just then the goat wrenched free and started across the park at a gallop, with the wailing girl in hot pursuit. Genie looked around her: dusk was falling and not a soul in sight. She opened a gate at random and walked up the path to the porch of a grey two-storey cottage.

"Can you please tell me," Genie addressed the closed door in a loud but polite voice, "how to find the post office?"

There was no reply. She stood there for a while thinking, then opened the door, entered the hall and walked into a room. Nobody seemed to be at home. Feeling ill at ease, she turned to go out but was arrested by the noiseless appearance of a large, tawny dog from under the table. The dog studied the flustered girl for

several moments and then, with a low growl, draped itself across the threshold.

"Don't be silly!" Genie cried, spreading out her fingers in fear. "I'm not a burglar! I didn't take anything! See, this is the key to our apartment, and this is the wire for Dad. My Dad's an army commander, understand?"

The dog neither responded nor stirred. Genie edged toward the open window and resumed:

"See? Just you stay where you are. Nice doggie, you're so clever and sweet."

But the moment Genie touched the windowsill the sweet dog leapt up with such a snarl that she jumped onto the sofa and cowered there.

"You're a nice one," she said, on the verge of tears. "You go ahead and catch bandits and spies, if you like, but I'm a — I'm a human being. Yes!" She stuck out her tongue at the dog and added: "Idiot!"

Genie put the key and telegram on the edge of the table near the sofa. There was nothing to do but wait for the owners of the house.

One hour passed, and then another. . . . It grew quite dark. Through the open window drifted the whistles of distant trains, the barking of dogs and the thud of a volleyball. Somewhere, someone was strumming a guitar. Only here, in the grey cottage, was everything desolate and still.

Genie propped her head against the hard arm-rest of the sofa and began to sob.

At last she fell fast asleep.

\*

When she awoke it was already morning.

The luxuriant rain-washed foliage outside the window rustled in the wind. A pump handle creaked nearby. She could hear the rasping of a saw. But inside the cottage it was as quiet as before.

Genie found her head resting on a soft leather cushion. A sheet covered her legs. The dog was gone.

That meant somebody had been there during the night!

Genie sprang up, tossed back her hair, straightened her crumpled frock, picked up her key and unsent wire and was about to make off when she noticed a slip of paper on the table. On it was written in large blue-pencilled lettering:

"Little girl, when you leave close the door tight." The note was signed "Timur."

Timur? Who's Timur? She ought to find him and thank him.

She glanced into the next room. Here she saw a desk with a writing set, an ashtray and a mirror on it. A battered old revolver lay to the right of the desk, next to a pair of leather leg-

gings. Propped against the desk was a Turkish sword in a scratched and tarnished scabbard. Genie walked into the room, put down her key and telegram, touched the sword and then drew it out of its scabbard, raised the blade over her head and looked into the mirror.

Her appearance was quite formidable. It would be wonderful to have her picture taken that way and then show it around to the kids at school! She could say that her father had taken her to the front with him once. The revolver would look good in her left hand. This way. Now that was still better. She knitted her brows as far down as they would go, compressed her lips, aimed at the mirror and pressed the trigger.

The room rang with a deafening report. A cloud of smoke veiled the windows. The mirror fell on top of the ashtray. Forgetting the key and telegram on the desk, Genie shot out of the room and fled from the weird and dangerous house as fast as her legs would carry her.

\*

Before she knew it she found herself at the bank of a stream. Now she had neither the key to their apartment, nor the telegram, nor a receipt for the telegram. And now she would have to tell Olga everything: about the dog, about sleeping in the empty cottage, about the Turkish

sword, and, finally, about the shot. A bad business! If Dad were there he would understand. But Olga wouldn't. Olga would flare up, or, worse luck, break into tears. And that would be awful. Genie knew how to cry too. But when she saw Olga in tears she always felt like climbing to the top of a telegraph pole or a tall tree or a chimney.

Genie took a swim to bolster her spirits and then slowly went off in search of her cottage.

Olga was in the kitchen starting up the Primus when Genie mounted the steps of the porch. When she heard the footsteps she swung around and fixed Genie with a mute, hostile gaze.

"Hello, Olya!" \* said Genie, stopping abruptly on the top step and forcing a smile. "Olya, you won't scold me, will you?"

"I certainly will!" Olga retorted without shifting her gaze from Genie's face.

"All right, then, scold away," Genie said meekly. "If you only knew what a strange adventure I've had! Olya, please don't twitch your eyebrows; nothing terrible's happened. I only lost the key to the apartment and didn't send the wire off to Dad."

Genie screwed up her eyes, gulped and got set to tell the whole story in one breath.

---

\* Affectionate for Olga. — *Trans.*

But just then the front gate flew open with a screech, and a shaggy goat covered with burs barged in with lowered horns and galloped to the back of the garden, followed closely by the wailing barefoot little girl whom Genie had met the previous day.

Taking advantage of the interlude, Genie broke off the ticklish conversation and dashed into the garden to join in the chase.

She overtook the panting little girl just as she was getting a grip on the goat's horns.

"Say, have you lost anything?" the little girl asked rapidly through clenched teeth while she pummelled and kicked the goat.

"No," Genie replied, puzzled.

"But isn't this yours?" The little girl showed her the key to the Moscow apartment.

"It is," whispered Genie, glancing apprehensively in the direction of the porch.

"Here, take the key, this note and the receipt. Your telegram's already been sent off," the little girl said, still speaking quickly through clenched teeth.

She thrust a small paper package into Genie's hand and struck the goat again.

The animal bolted toward the gate, with the barefoot little girl darting like a shadow through brambles and nettles at its heels. They skipped through the gate and were gone.

Genie opened the package, hunching her shoulders as though it were she and not the goat who had been beaten.

"Here's the key. And a receipt for the telegram. That means somebody sent it off. But who? Aha, here's a note. What's this?"

The note, written in large blue-pencilled lettering, read:

"Little girl, don't be afraid of anybody at home. Everything's okay and I won't tell anybody anything." It was signed "Timur."

In a trance, Genie quietly tucked the note into her pocket. Then she squared her shoulders and calmly went back to Olga.

Olga was still standing in the same place by the unlit Primus, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Olya!" Genie cried remorsefully. "I was only joking. Why are you mad at me? I cleaned the whole apartment and the windows too. I really worked hard. I did all the laundry and washed all the floors. Here's the key and the receipt for Dad's wire. Now let me give you a kiss — you know how much I love you! Want me to jump from the roof into the nettle patch for you?"

Without waiting for Olga to reply, Genie fell on her neck.

"Yes — but I was worried," Olga said in desperation. "You're always playing the most impossible tricks. And Dad told me to — stop it,

Genie! Genie, for goodness' sakes, my hands are covered with kerosene! Look, Genie, suppose you pour some milk into the pot and put it on the stove to boil."

"I — I can't help playing tricks," Genie muttered when Olga had walked over to the washstand.

She placed the pot of milk on the Primus, felt for the note in her pocket, and said:

"Olya, is there a God?"

"No," replied Olga, lowering her face to the faucet.

"But who is there, then?"

"Leave me alone!" Olga exclaimed in annoyance. "There isn't anybody!"

Genie was silent for a moment and then resumed:

"Olya, who is Timur?"

"Not a God but a king," replied Olga grudgingly as she soaped her hands and face. "A vicious, lame king of the Middle Ages."

"But if this Timur isn't a king and he isn't vicious and he isn't out of the Middle Ages, then who is he?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Leave me alone! Why are you so excited about Timur anyway?"

"Because I think I like him very much."

"Who?" Olga raised an incredulous, lathered face. "What are you babbling about? What's all

this nonsense? Why can't you let me wash in peace! Just wait till Dad comes home. He'll look into this love of yours!"

"Well, and what about Dad!" Genie cried out with feeling. "Even if he does come, it won't be for long. And he certainly wouldn't mistreat a lonely, defenceless person."

"Who's lonely and defenceless?" Olga asked in surprise. "You? Oh, Genie, I really don't know what to make of you; I can't imagine who you take after!"

Genie lowered her head. Staring at her reflection on the nickel-plated surface of the tea kettle, she replied proudly and without hesitation:

"After Dad. Him alone. After him. Only him. And after no one else in the world."

\*

The elderly gentleman, Doctor F. G. Kololchikov, was sitting in his garden tinkering with a wall clock.

In front of him stood his grandson Kolya with a doleful expression on his face.

Kolya was supposed to be helping his grandfather. Actually, however, he had been holding a screwdriver in readiness for more than an hour, waiting until his grandfather would ask for it.

His grandfather was very patient with the steel spring, which simply refused to stay in

place. There seemed to be no end to this waiting. It was a great shame, especially since Sima Simakov's tousled head had bobbed up several times from behind the fence, and Sima was a very energetic and knowing person. Sima was making such strange and mysterious signs with his tongue, head and fingers that even Kolya's five-year-old sister Tatyana, who was sitting under a linden tree trying to stuff a bur into the mouth of a sprawling dog, suddenly screamed and jerked her grandfather by the trousers. At this Sima Simakov's head instantly disappeared.

Finally the spring was properly installed.

"Man must toil," the grey-haired gentleman observed, raising his moist forehead and addressing Kolya. "Whereas your face looks as if I'd been giving you a dose of castor oil. Give me the screwdriver and take the pliers. Toil imparts dignity to man. And it's precisely dignity that you lack. For example, yesterday you ate four portions of ice cream and didn't share any with your little sister."

"She's lying, the smarty!" cried Kolya indignantly. He glared at Tatyana. "I let her have two bites three times. And she goes and tells on me, and takes four kopeks off Mom's table besides."

"And you climbed out of the window on a rope last night," Tatyana announced imperturb-

ably, without turning her head. "And you've got a flashlight under your pillow. And yesterday a bad boy threw stones through our bedroom window. He kept throwing stones and whistling."

Kolya Kolokolchikov gasped at this fresh piece of impudence on the part of the shameless Tatyana. He began to tremble from head to foot. Fortunately his grandfather was too occupied to pay attention to such dangerous slander, or else he simply had not heard. Luckily, too, the milk-woman came into the garden with her cans at that moment. Pouring out the milk, she sighed and began:

"Can you imagine, dear Fyodor Grigoryevich, some burglars came into the yard an' tried to steal my oak barrel last night! An' today people say that two men were seen sittin' on my roof early this mornin': sittin' on the chimney, mind you, an' danglin' their legs, the scoundrels."

"On the chimney? Why should they do that?" inquired the puzzled gentleman.

But at that moment an ear-splitting clanging and jangling issued from the direction of the chicken coop. The screwdriver shook in the old gentleman's hand and the capricious spring took advantage of this opportunity to pop out and hit the roof with a bang. Everybody, even Tatyana and the lazy dog, turned around at once, wondering what the noise was all about. Without

uttering a word Kolya Kolokolchikov scampered off across the carrot patch like a hare and disappeared behind the fence.

He halted near a cow barn, from which the same noises were coming as from the chicken coop; it sounded as if somebody were hitting a section of steel rail with a hammer. Here he ran into Sima Simakov and asked him excitedly:

"Say, what's up? Is that the alarm?"

"Naw! I guess it's No. 1 general call signal."

They scaled the fence and dived through a hole in the paling of the park, where they bumped into a sturdy, broad-shouldered little chap named Geika. Vassili Ladygin showed up next, and after him still others. Swiftly and noiselessly they sped toward their destination along paths known to them alone, exchanging clipped phrases as they ran:

"Is that the alarm?"

"Naw. It's No. 1 general call."

"What call? This isn't 'three-stop, three-stop.' It's some lunatic wheeling off ten at a time!"

"All right, we'll see."

"Okay, we'll check up on it!"

"Faster! Speed it up!"

\*

At just about that time, a tall, dark-haired boy of about thirteen was standing in the room of the

cottage where Genie had spent the night. He was wearing thin black trousers and a dark blue sleeveless jumper with a red star embroidered in front.

A shaggy, grey-haired old man came in. His coarse linen shirt was threadbare and his baggy trousers were covered with patches. A crude wooden leg was strapped to his left knee. In one hand he held a note, and in the other he clutched a battered old revolver.

"'Little girl, when you leave close the door tight,'" he read aloud derisively. "Well, perhaps you'll let me know who spent the night here on the sofa?"

"A girl I know," the boy replied reluctantly. "I wasn't at home and the dog wouldn't let her leave."

"That's a lie!" said the old man testily. "If you knew her you'd have written her name on the note."

"When I wrote it I didn't know her name. Now I do."

"You didn't know it? And you left her here in the morning all by herself? My dear boy, something's wrong with you and you ought to be put in an insane asylum. That good-for-nothing girl broke the mirror and chipped the ashtray. It was a good thing the revolver was charged with blanks. What if they were real bullets?"

"But Uncle — you don't keep real bullets anyway, because your enemies' swords and rifles are made of wood."

A smile seemed to flit across the old man's features. But he tossed back his shaggy head and snapped:

"Better look out! I notice everything. I can see you're up to some monkey business, and if you don't take care I'll send you back to your mother."

The old man stumped upstairs. As soon as he was gone the boy jumped up, grabbed the paws of the dog, which came trotting in just then, and kissed it on the nose.

"Well, Rita! We got it hot! It's okay, though. He's in a good mood today. He'll start singing in a minute."

And that was exactly what happened. The old man upstairs cleared his throat, let out a trial do-re-mi, and then began to sing in a low baritone:

*Three nights I have not slept. I always seem  
to hear,  
Disturbing noises in the rushes and the water  
down below.*

\*

"Stop that, you lunatic!" Timur cried. "Where are you dragging me?"

Suddenly he slammed the door leading to his uncle's rooms upstairs and raced the dog down the hallway and out onto the porch.

In a corner of the porch, near a small telephone, a little bronze bell attached to a cord was jerking and banging against the wall.

The boy put his hand over the bell and wound the cord around a nail. Then the cord stopped jerking and slackened — it had probably broken somewhere along the line. Angry and baffled, he picked up the receiver:

\*

An hour before all this happened, Olga was sitting at a table with a physics textbook before her.

Genie came in and picked up a little bottle of iodine.

"Genie," said Olga severely. "How did you get that scratch on your shoulder?"

"Oh, I was walking along," Genie answered carelessly, "and something prickly or sharp got in my way. That's how it happened."

"Why doesn't anything prickly or sharp get in my way?" Olga said, mocking Genie's tone.

"They do, too! You've got a math exam in your way. That's prickly and sharp, isn't it? Watch out it doesn't trip you up! Olya, don't be an engineer, be a doctor," Genie chattered on,

shoving a small mirror in front of her sister's face. "Just take a look at yourself: what sort of an engineer would you make? An engineer ought to be like this — this — and this." (She made three faces.) "And you look like this — this — and this." Genie rolled her eyes, arched her eyebrows and smiled sweetly.

"Silly!" said Olga, hugging and kissing her sister and then gently pushing her away. "Go away, Genie, and don't bother me. You'd be more useful if you fetched some water from the well."

Genie took an apple from a plate and retreated to a corner, where she stood gazing out of the window for several minutes. Then she opened the accordion case and said:

"You know what, Olya? A man came up to me today — a nice-looking blond fellow in white flannels — and said, 'What's your name, little girl?' 'Genie,' I said."

"Genie, please don't bother me and leave that instrument alone," said Olga without turning around or lifting her eyes from the book.

" 'And your sister's name,' " continued Genie, tugging at the accordion, " 'is Olga, I believe?' "

"Genie, please don't bother me and leave that instrument alone!" repeated Olga, beginning to listen in spite of herself. .

" 'Your sister plays very well,' he said. 'Does she intend to study at the Conservatory of

Music?' " (Genie dragged the accordion out of the case and fixed the strap over her shoulder.) " 'No,' I told him. 'She's already specializing in reinforced concrete.' Then he said, 'Oh!'" (Genie pressed one of the keys.) "So I said, 'Ho!'" (Genie pressed another key.)

"You horrid child! Put that instrument back at once!" cried Olga, jumping up. "Who gave you permission to speak to strange men?"

"All right, I'll put it away," said Genie with a pout. "It wasn't me who started it. He began first. I wanted to tell you the rest, but now I won't. You just wait till Dad comes home, he'll show you!"

"Me? It's you he'll do the showing to. You're not letting me study."

"No, it's you!" cried Genie, picking up an empty pail and flying out onto the porch. "I'll tell him how you send me running for kerosene, soap and water a hundred times a day! I'm not a truck, or a horse, or a tractor either!"

Genie brought in the pail of water and set it on a bench, but since Olga did not even look up from her book, she went out into the garden feeling offended.

She strolled over to the little green clearing in front of the old two-storey barn, took a sling out of her pocket, and, stretching the rubber band, shot a tiny cardboard parachutist up into the air.

Soaring upside down, the parachutist turned a somersault and a little blue paper parachute popped open over his head. But just then a gust of wind bore him off into the blackness of the barn loft window.

Horrors! Something had to be done to save the little cardboard man. Genie ran all around the barn, from whose roof taut strings stretched in all directions. She dragged a rickety ladder over, propped it against the window, climbed to the top and jumped down onto the floor of the loft.

How queer! The loft was inhabited! On one of the walls there hung some rolls of twine, a lantern, two signalling flags across each other and a map of the locality marked with mysterious signs. In a corner lay a pile of straw covered with sacking, and an upturned soap box.

A large wheel that looked like a ship's helm stuck out from the wall near the mossy sieve of a roof. Above it hung a home-made telephone.

Genie peeked through a crack in the wall. Outside the rich foliage was rippling like a sea and pigeons were frolicking in the sky. Genie decided to make the pigeons seagulls, and the old barn with its ropes, lanterns and flags — a big ship. She'd be the captain.

It was great fun. She turned the wheel. The taut strings began to vibrate and hum. The wind howled and whipped up the green waves. Her

barn-ship seemed to be tacking slowly and majestically.

"Helm to port!" she commanded loudly and put her weight on the heavy wheel.

Just then a few straight and narrow shafts of sunlight broke through the holes in the roof and fell on her face and frock. But to Genie these rays were enemy searchlights trying to pick her out. She decided to give battle.

She jerked the creaking wheel, manoeuvring to right and left, and imperiously rapped out commands.

Soon the sharp searchlight beams waned and died out. That, of course, did not mean that the sun had hidden behind a cloud. It meant that the routed enemy squadron was going to the bottom.

The battle was over. Genie wiped her forehead with a dusty palm. Suddenly the telephone buzzed. Genie had not expected that — she'd thought it was a toy telephone — and felt scared. She picked up the receiver. A sharp, angry voice came through.

"Hullo! Hullo! Who's there? Who's the loony that's breaking the wires and sending out dizzy signals?"

"It's not a loony," Genie muttered in confusion. "It's me, Genie."

"You crazy girl!" the voice said, now a bit

frightened. "Get off the wheel and run for your life! They'll come piling in any moment and beat you up!"

Genie flung the receiver down, but it was too late. A head popped through the window — Geika's — and then Sima Simakov, Kolya Kolo-kolchikov and the others all tumbled in one after another.

"Who are you?" asked Genie, backing away from the window in fright. "Go away! This is our garden. I didn't ask you to come."

But a silent, compact wall of boys advanced shoulder to shoulder on Genie. Finding herself pressed back in a corner, she screamed.

At that moment a shadow was thrown across the window. The boys turned and opened ranks, and Genie found herself face to face with a tall, dark-haired boy in a blue, sleeveless jumper with a red star embroidered in front.

"Quiet, Genie!" he said loudly. "You mustn't shout. Nobody will touch you. We're already acquainted. I'm Timur."

"You're Timur?" said Genie incredulously, opening wide her tear-filled eyes. "You mean it was you who covered me with a sheet last night? Who left the note on the table? Who sent off the wire to Dad and had the key and receipt brought to me? But why did you do it? Where do you know me from?"

He took her hand and said:

"You stay here with us. Sit down and listen, and then you'll understand everything."

\*

The boys squatted down on the sack-covered straw around Timur, who had spread out the map in front of him.

A lookout perched himself on a swing in the loft window. From his neck dangled a pair of dented opera glasses.

Genie sat to one side and took in the proceedings of this secret headquarters conference with guarded interest. Timur had the floor:

"At daybreak tomorrow, while everybody is still asleep, Kolokolchikov and I will repair the lines she (he pointed to Genie) broke."

"He'll oversleep," gloomily put in the bullet-headed Geika, who was wearing a striped sailor's jersey. "He only wakes up for breakfast and dinner."

"That's a l-lie!" Kolya Kolokolchikov jumped up and stuttered. "I g-get up with the first s-sunbeam."

"I don't know whether it's the first sunbeam or the second, but I do know he'll oversleep," Geika retorted stubbornly.

At this juncture the swinging lookout whistled. The boys sprang to their feet.

A mounted artillery battalion was tearing down the road in a cloud of dust. The powerful horses, in leather and metal trappings, rapidly pulled along green ammunition wagons and guns covered with grey tarpaulin.

The sun-tanned, weather-beaten riders jauntily took the bend, sitting upright in their saddles. Battery after battery disappeared into the woods, and soon the entire unit was out of sight.

"They're headed for the railroad station to board a train," Kolya Kolokolchikov explained importantly. "I can tell by their uniforms. I can tell when they're out on drill, on parade, or on anything else."

"You just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut!" Geika snapped. "We've got eyes too. You know, boys, this windbag wants to run away to the Red Army!"

"You can't do that," Timur intervened. "It's a crazy idea."

"Why can't I?" asked Kolya, reddening. "How come before kids always ran away to the front?"

"That was before! And now the commanders and chiefs have strict orders to kick out all the kids."

"How do you mean, kick 'em out?" cried Kolya Kolokolchikov, flaring up and turning a deeper red. "You mean to say — us kids?"

"That's right!" Timur heaved a sigh. "Us kids. And now, fellows, let's get down to business."

The boys took their places.

"Some kids have stolen apples from the garden of No. 34, Crooked Lane," Kolya Kolo-kolchikov announced sullenly. "They broke two branches and stepped all over a flower bed."

"Whose house is that?" Timur glanced at his notebook. "It's Red Army man Krukov's. Now, which one of you used to specialize in stealing apples?"

"Me," piped an embarrassed voice.

"Who could have done this job?"

"Misha Kvakin and his assistant, the guy they call The Figure. They picked out a Michurin tree; it grows Golden Sap apples."

"That Kvakin again!" Timur reflected a moment. "Geika! Did you talk to him?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Gave him two socks in the jaw."

"What'd he do?"

"Well, he socked me two back."

"All you can say is 'socked him and socked me back.' And a fat lot of good it does! Okay! We'll tackle Kvakin privately. Next?"

"The old milkwoman who lives at No. 25 saw her son off to the cavalry," a boy in the corner reported.

"Just woke up!" Timur shook his head reproachfully. "We've had our sign on the gate for two days now. Who put it there, you, Kolo-kolchikov?"

"Yes."

"Then why is the upper left point as crooked as an eel? If you do a job, do it right. People'll laugh when they see it. Next?"

Sima Simakov jumped up and confidently rattled off his report.

"A goat's been lost at No. 54, Pushkareva Road. I was walking along when I saw an old woman beating up a little girl. I yelled out, 'Mam, beating's not allowed!' She says, 'She's lost the goat, blast her hide!' 'Where's it gone to?' 'Yonder, in the gully back of the woods. Chewed through her rope an' disappeared, you'd think the wolves clean swallowed it.'"

"Wait a minute! Whose house is that?"

"Paul Guryev's — he's a Red Army man. The little girl's his daughter. Her name is Nyura. That's her grandma who was beating her. Don't know her name. The goat's grey, with a black back. They call it Manya."

"Find that goat!" ordered Timur. "A squad of four men will go with you. You, and you, and you, and you. Well, fellows, is that all?"

"A girl's been crying at No. 22," Geika submitted reluctantly.

"Why was she crying?"

"I asked her but she wouldn't say."

"You ought to have asked her better. Maybe somebody hit her or hurt her feelings."

"I asked but she wouldn't say."

"A big girl?"

"She's four."

"That's worse! Four years old! Just a moment, whose house is that?"

"Lieutenant Pavlov's. The one who was killed at the border not long ago."

" 'I asked but she wouldn't say,' " Timur mocked Geika. He frowned and thought a while. "All right. I'll take care of that myself. You needn't bother about it."

"Misha Kvakin's come into sight!" cried the lookout. "Walking down the other side of the street, eating an apple. Timur, let's send out a squad to give him the bumps!"

"No need. You all remain here. I'll be back soon."

He climbed down the ladder and disappeared in the bushes. Now the lookout made another report:

"I can see a good-looking girl, name unknown, at the gate. She's got a pitcher and she's buying milk. I suppose she's the owner of the house."

"Is that your sister?" asked Kolya Kolokolchikov, tugging at Genie's sleeve. Receiving no

answer, he warned her with an important and sullen air: "Better not try to call out to her now."

"You sit still!" retorted Genie derisively, jerking her sleeve free. "Think you're a big shot, don't you!"

"Look out," Geika teased Kolya, "or she'll beat you up."

"Who? Me?" Kolya was stung to the quick. "What's she got? Nothing but nails! Me, I've got real muscles. Here, look at these arm muscles! Feel that? And look at these leg muscles!"

"She'll beat you up anyway. Hey, guys, keep your eyes open! Timur's going up to Kvakin."

Idly swinging a branch, Timur cut across Kvakin's path.

Kvakin saw him and came to a standstill. His flat face registered neither surprise nor fear.

"Hiya, Commissar!" he said quietly, cocking his head on one side. "Where you rushing to?"

"Hiya, Chief!" Timur replied in the same tone. "To meet you."

"Glad to see you, but haven't got anything to treat you to. Except for maybe this." He stuck his hand inside his shirt and produced an apple.

"Stolen?" asked Timur, biting into it.

"That's right," Kvakin said. "Golden Sap. Only trouble is, it's not real ripe yet."

"Sour as anything!" Timur made a face and tossed the apple away. "Look here: ever see this sign on the fence of No. 34?" Timur pointed to the star embroidered on his blue jumper.

"Well, and what if I did?" Kvakin was on his guard. "Brother, I keep my eyes peeled day and night."

"Then take my advice, and when you see this sign anywhere, day or night, run for it as fast as you know how."

"Say, Commissar, you're a hot one, ain't you!" drawled Kvakin. "How about piping down; we've talked enough for one day."

"Say, Chief, you're a stubborn one, ain't you," said Timur without raising his voice. "This is the last time I'm telling you, so you better keep it in mind and pass it on to the rest of your gang."

Nobody watching this scene could have thought that those two were not the best of friends but enemies. And for that reason Olga, standing at the gate with her pitcher, asked the milkwoman whether she knew the boy who was talking to that ruffian Kvakin.

"No," said the milkwoman vehemently. "I suppose he's just another one of those hoodlums. I see him hangin' around your house most of the time. Watch out they don't beat up your little sister, my dear."

Olga was disturbed. She shot a hostile glance at the two boys, walked back to the porch, put away the pitcher of milk, locked the door and went out to look for Genie, who had been away from the house for more than two hours now.

\*

On his return to the loft Timur told the boys about his talk with Kvakin. They decided to send the gang a written ultimatum the following day.

The boys climbed down noiselessly from the loft and ran home, some crawling through gaps in the fences, others taking them in their stride.

Timur turned to Genie.

"Well?" he said. "Do you know what it's all about now?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "Only not quite. Make it simpler."

"All right, but first climb down and follow me. Your sister isn't home now, anyway."

When they had reached the ground Timur gave the ladder a push and sent it toppling over.

It was growing dark now, but Genie followed Timur without a moment's hesitation.

They halted at the old milkwoman's house. Timur glanced around. There was no one in sight. He drew a tube of oil paint out of his pocket and went up to the gate. The upper left-hand point

of the red star drawn on it indeed curved like an eel.

He straightened the line with a steady hand and tapered the point nicely.

"What are you doing that for?" Genie asked. "Please tell me what it's all about."

Timur put the tube back in his pocket, wiped his stained finger with a burdock leaf, and, looking Genie straight in the face, said:

"That star means a man living in this house has gone to the Red Army. And that from now on this house is under our care and protection. Is your father in the army?"

"Yes!" replied Genie with pride and deep feeling. "He's a commander."

"That means you come under our care and protection too."

They stopped at the gate of another cottage. Here there was a red star with a thick black border around it.

"See that?" said Timur. "A man left this house for the Red Army, but he's gone for good. This is Lieutenant Pavlov's house; he was killed not long ago at the border. His wife and little daughter live here — good old Geika hasn't found out yet why the girl's always crying. If you get a chance. Genie, do something nice for her."

He said all this very simply, but cold shivers

ran down Genie's back, though the evening was quite warm.

She stood there silently, her head bent. Just for the sake of saying something, she asked:

"Is Geika really a good boy?"

"He is," said Timur. "His father was a sailor. He likes to yell at that little boaster Kolokolchikov, but he always sticks up for him just the same."

A sharp, angry cry made them spin around. Olga was standing a short distance away.

Genie touched Timur's hand. She wanted to introduce him to Olga.

But when another sharp call followed she gave up the idea.

Genie nodded her head guiltily to Timur, shrugged her shoulders in resignation, and walked over to Olga.

"Eugenia!" said Olga, on the verge of tears, breathing heavily. "I forbid you to talk to that boy. Do you hear?"

"But Olya," Genie muttered. "What's the matter?"

"I forbid you to associate with that boy," Olga repeated firmly. "You're thirteen and I'm eighteen. I'm your sister. I'm older than you. And when Dad left, he told me...."

"But Olya, you don't understand a thing!" Genie cried in despair. She trembled. She wanted to explain, to justify herself. But she could not.

She did not have the right to. She waved her hand hopelessly and said nothing more to her sister.

She went straight to bed, but sleep would not come for a long time. And after she fell asleep she did not hear the mailman knock on the window at night and deliver a telegram from her father.

\*

At daybreak the shepherd blew his horn. The old milkwoman opened her gate and led out her cow to join the herd in the meadow. She had scarcely turned the corner when five boys jumped out from behind an acacia shrub and scuttled over to the well, trying not to make a clatter with their empty buckets.

"Pump it!"

"Let's have it!"

"Grab it!"

"Take it!"

The boys rushed into the yard, cold water spilling on their bare feet as they ran, emptied their buckets into the oak barrel and dashed back to the well.

Timur ran up to Sima Simakov, who was wet from continually pumping up the water, and asked:

"Seen Kolokolchikov anywhere? No? Then he's overslept. Better hurry up! The old woman'll be back before you know it."

Timur stole into the Kolokolchikov garden, stood under a tree and whistled. Without waiting for an answer he climbed the tree and peered into a room. All he could see from his perch was the end of a bed standing by the window and a pair of blanket-covered legs.

He threw a piece of bark onto the bed and called softly:

"Kolya, get up! Kolya!"

The sleeper did not stir. Then Timur pulled out his knife, sliced off a long, thin switch, sharpened the end and cast it into the window. He caught hold of the blanket and tugged.

The light blanket slipped out over the windowsill. At that moment a hoarse shout issued from the room.

Rolling his sleepy eyes, a grey-haired gentleman sprang out of bed in his nightclothes, clutched the retreating blanket and leaned out of the window.

Finding himself face to face with this venerable old man, Timur dropped to the ground.

Meanwhile the old gentleman flung the recaptured blanket on his bed, snatched his double-barreled shotgun off the wall and hastily put on his spectacles. Then he poked the gun through the window, pointed the muzzle skyward, closed his eyes and fired.

Timur was so frightened that he did not stop running until he reached the well. There had been a mistake. He had taken the sleeper for Kolya, and the old gentleman had naturally mistaken him for a burglar.

Just then Timur saw the milkwoman going through the gate with her water buckets.

He scurried behind a clump of acacias and peeped out.

When she returned from the well, the old woman lifted a bucket and poured the water into the barrel. The next moment she sprang aside wildly as water splashed out of the already brimming barrel.

Groaning and turning this way and that in bewilderment, the old woman inspected the barrel from all sides. She plunged her hand into the water and sniffed it. Then she hurried over to the porch to see if the lock on her door was in order. Then, finally, not knowing what to think, she tapped at her neighbour's window.

Timur laughed and came out of his hiding place. He had to hurry. The sun was already rising. Kolya Kolokolchikov had not appeared and the lines still had to be repaired.

As he made his way through the garden to the barn, Timur glanced into an open window of Genie's cottage.

Genie, clad in shorts and a polo shirt, was writing at a table near her bed. She kept tossing back her hair impatiently from her face.

Genie made no sign of alarm or surprise when she saw Timur. She only motioned to him not to wake Olga. Then she put her unfinished letter in a drawer and tiptoed out of the room.

When Genie heard about Timur's morning misadventure, she forgot all of Olga's instructions and gladly volunteered to help him repair the lines she had broken.

After they had finished the job and Timur already stood on the other side of the fence, Genie said:

"I don't know why, but my sister hates you."

"There you are," said Timur with chagrin.

"My uncle feels the same way about you!"

He was about to go when she stopped him.

"Wait a minute. You ought to comb your hair — you're a sight today."

She handed him her comb. At that very moment Olga cried out indignantly from the window.

"Genie! What are you doing?"

A moment later the two sisters stood facing each other on the porch.

"I don't choose your friends, do I?" Genie defended herself desperately. "What friends? Quite ordinary friends. In white flannels. 'Oh, how wonderfully your sister plays!' Wonderfully! He ought to hear how wonderfully you scold! See this? I'm writing all about it to Dad."

"Eugenia! That boy is a hoodlum and you're a little fool," said Olga coldly, trying to keep her temper. "Write to Dad if you like, but if I ever see you in that boy's company again I'll leave this place and take you back to Moscow at once. And you know that I keep my word, don't you?"

"I do, you tyrant!" replied Genie with tears in her eyes. "I know it all too well!"

"And now read this," said Olga. She placed the telegram received the night before on the table and went out.

The telegram read:

"Stopping in Moscow few hours enroute. Will wire date hour later. Dad."

Genie wiped her eyes, pressed the telegram to her lips and murmured:

"Dad, please come soon! Dad, your little Genie is having such a hard time!"

\*

Two cartloads of firewood were delivered to the house of the old woman who had

spanked the lively little Nyura when she lost the goat.

Grandma groaned and wheezed as she began to stack the logs, upbraiding the careless drivers for dumping them all over the place. The work was too much for her. She was seized with a coughing fit and sat down on the steps to catch her breath. Then she picked up a watering can and hobbled off to her vegetable garden. The only person remaining in the yard was Nyura's three-year-old brother, a young man of evident energy and enterprise, for the moment his Grandma was gone he picked up a stick and began to beat a tattoo on a bench and an upturned washtub.

At this Sima Simakov, who had just been hunting for the runaway goat — which could easily have vied with a Bengal tiger in bounding over bushes and through gullies — left one of his men at the fringe of the woods and at the head of the others dashed into the yard.

He stuffed a handful of wild strawberries into the youngster's mouth and stuck a shiny crow's feather into his hand while his squad began feverishly to stack the logs.

Meanwhile Sima Simakov ran off to detain Grandma in the vegetable patch. He stopped at a clump of cherry and apple trees and peeped through a hole in the fence.

He saw that Grandma had gathered an apronful of cucumbers and was about to return to the yard.

He tapped softly on the boards of the fence.

Grandma gave a start. Then Sima picked up a stick and began to stir the branches of an apple tree with it.

Grandma thought she saw somebody climbing stealthily over the fence to steal apples. She dumped her cucumbers onto the ground, pulled up a bunch of nettles, crept over to the fence and crouched low.

Sima Simakov peeped through the hole again, but this time he could not see the old woman. Disturbed, he jumped up, caught hold of the top of the fence and began to draw himself up cautiously.

At that moment the old woman leaped out of her hiding place with a triumphant cry and lashed Sima on the hands with the nettles.

Wildly waving his stinging hands, Sima darted back to the gate, through which the other boys, now finished with their task, were running.

Again the yard was deserted but for the little boy. He picked up a shingle, put it on the edge of the woodstack, and then dragged over a piece of birchbark.

Grandma found him thus occupied when she came back from the vegetable garden. She stared with bulging eyes at the neatly stacked logs:

"Who's been busying himself here while I was away?" she asked.

The youngster added his birchbark to the stack and said importantly:

"Can't you see who it is, Grandma? It's me."

The milkwoman came into the yard and the two old women began to talk excitedly about the strange things that were happening with the water and wood. They tried to pump the youngster but they learned very little from him. He told them that some men had jumped into the yard, stuck sweet strawberries into his mouth, given him a feather and even promised to catch him a hare with two ears and four legs. Then they had thrown the logs into place and run away.

Nyura came into the yard.

"Nyura," said Grandma, "did you see who came into our yard just now?"

"No, I was looking for the goat," Nyura replied sourly. "Been running around all morning looking for her."

"She's been stolen!" Grandma wailed, turning to the milkwoman. "What a goat she was! Not a goat but a regular dove."

"Dove!" snorted Nyura, moving away from her Grandma. "When she starts tossing her horns you can't jump out of the way fast enough! Doves don't have horns."

"Hold your tongue, Nyura! Keep quiet, you good-for-nothing!" cried Grandma. "I'm not saying the goat wasn't a bit high-spirited. I wanted to sell the little darling. And now my little dove's gone."

At that moment the gate flew open with a screech. Sweeping the ground with its horns, the goat galloped in and headed straight for the milkwoman. That good woman snatched up her heavy milk can and leaped onto the porch with a shriek just as the goat rammed the side of the house and came to a stop.

Everybody noticed, then, that a board had been fastened to the animal's horns. On it was written:

*I am a goat, a goat,  
With a hungry throat.  
If Nyura should be beaten,  
The culprit will be eaten!*

Meanwhile, at the corner beyond the fence, a group of boys were laughing merrily.

Sima Simakov pushed a stick into the ground and stamped around it in a wild dance, chanting proudly:

*We're not a gang or band  
That has gotten out of hand.  
We're a group of pioneers,*

*Strong and helpful for our years.  
Hoorah!*

Then the boys darted off noiselessly like a flock of siskins.

There was still plenty of work to do, but the chief thing now was to draw up an ultimatum and send it to Misha Kvakin.

Nobody knew how to draw up an ultimatum, so Timur asked his uncle about it.

The latter explained that each country had its own way of drawing up ultimatums but that courtesy obliged you to wind them up with the following words:

"Please accept, Mr. Minister, assurances of my highest esteem."

After this the ultimatum was tendered to the head of the hostile country by the accredited ambassador.

This method did not appeal either to Timur or to any of the other boys. First of all, they had no intention of delivering respects of any kind to that hoodlum Kvakin; secondly, they had neither a permanent ambassador nor even a minister to that gang.

After discussing the point they decided to send a simpler ultimatum, like the one the Zaporozhye Cossacks sent the Turkish sultan. They had all seen the picture of it in that book about

how the brave Cossacks fought the Turks, the Tatars and the Lyakhs.

\*

Behind the grey gate with the black-bordered red star, in the shady garden of the house facing the cottage in which Olga and Genie lived, a fair-haired little girl was toddling along the gravel walk. Her mother, an attractive young woman with a sad and tired face, was sitting in a rocking chair near the window; on the sill stood a colourful bouquet of wild flowers.

Before her lay a pile of open telegrams and letters — from relatives and friends, acquaintances and strangers.

The letters and telegrams were full of warm sympathy. They seemed to speak to her from a distance, like a forest echo, which does not call the traveller anywhere and promises nothing, yet comforts him with the knowledge that people are close by and that he is not alone in the dark woods.

The fair-haired little girl stopped near the fence, holding her doll upside down so that its wooden arms and flaxen braids trailed over the ground. A painted wooden hare was dangling from the top of the fence. With a droll expression on its face, the hare jerked one of its paws and strummed a little balalaika.

Thrilled by this inexplicable wonder of wonders, the little girl dropped her doll and ran up to the fence. And lo, the pretty hare dropped right into her hands! Genie's twinkling face popped up from behind the fence.

The little girl looked up at Genie.

"Were you playing with me?" she asked.

"Yes. Would you like me to jump down?"

"There's a nettle patch here," the little girl warned her after thinking it over. "I stung my hand yesterday."

"That's all right," said Genie, jumping down. "I'm not afraid of it. Show me the nettle that stung your hand yesterday. Is this it? Well, I'll just pull it up, stamp on it and spit on it. All right? Now let's play. You take the hare and I'll take the doll."

From the porch Olga saw Genie playing near their neighbour's fence, but she did not want to interrupt her little sister, who had wept enough for one morning. But when Genie climbed over the fence into the neighbour's garden Olga felt disturbed. She crossed over to the gate and opened it.

Genie and the little girl were now standing at the window near the woman, who was smiling at the antics of the droll hare her daughter was demonstrating.

Noting Genie's perturbed expression when her

sister entered the garden, the woman gathered that Olga was displeased.

"Please don't be angry with her," she said softly to Olga. "She's only playing with my little girl. We've had a terrible misfortune...." The woman fell silent. "I've been crying my eyes out, while she" — the woman pointed to her tiny daughter and added almost in a whisper — "she doesn't even know that her father was killed at the border not long ago."

It was now Olga's turn to feel abashed, while Genie watched her with a bitter and reproachful expression.

"I'm all alone," the woman continued. "My mother lives far, far away in the mountains. My brothers are in the army and I have no sisters."

She touched Genie's shoulder and pointed to the window.

"Did you put this bunch of flowers on my porch last night?" she asked.

"No," replied Genie breathlessly. "Not I. That must have been one of our...."

"Who?" Olga gave Genie a puzzled look.

"I don't know." Genie was frightened. "It wasn't me. I don't know anything about it. Look, somebody's coming."

Two air commanders were climbing out of a car that had stopped in front of the

house. They opened the gate and strode down the walk.

"They've come to see me," the woman said. "I suppose they'll ask me again if I want to take a rest in some sanatorium in the Crimea or the Caucasus."

The men touched their caps. The senior officer, a captain, had probably caught her last words, for he said:

"No, it's not a sanatorium in the Crimea or the Caucasus this time. You wanted to see your mother, didn't you? Well, she's coming to pay you a visit. Leaving today from Irkutsk. She was brought to Irkutsk by special plane."

"Who arranged it?" the woman exclaimed in a happy and dazed voice. "You?"

"No," the captain replied. "Our comrades and yours."

The little girl came running up and looked boldly at the visitors; she was evidently familiar with the blue uniform.

"Mummie," she said, "make me a swing and I'll fly back and forth, back and forth. Far, far away, like Daddy."

"Oh no, you mustn't!" her mother cried. She picked up the little girl and hugged her tight. "No, no, never fly away as far... as your Daddy."

On a daisy-covered green off Little Ravine Lane, behind the chapel whose peeling murals depicted stern, bearded old men and clean-shaven angels, and somewhat to the right of the picture of Judgment Day with its cauldrons, tar and darting fiends, Misha Kvakin's gang was playing cards.

They had no money, and so they played for "backbreakers," "flicks" and "dead man comes alive." The loser's eyes were bound, he was forced to lie on his back on the grass, and he was given a "candle," that is, a long stick. With this stick he was supposed to repel his kind brethren, who out of pity for the dead man would do everything they could to revive him by lashing mercilessly at his bare knees, ankles and heels with nettle switches.

The game was at its height when the shrill call of a bugle came from the other side of the fence.

Timur's envoys stood there.

Kolya Kolokolchikov, the staff trumpeter, gripped a shiny brass bugle, while the barefoot Geika, his face stern, held a big envelope made of wrapping paper.

"What kind of circus act is this?" asked the boy dubbed The Figure, leaning over the fence. "Misha!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Drop the game, a delegation's come to see you!"

"Here I am," said Kvakin, hoisting himself up on the fence. "Hiya there, Geika! Who's that shrimp you've got with you?"

"Here, take this envelope." Geika handed over the ultimatum. "You've got twenty-four hours to think it over. I'll be here for the answer at the same time tomorrow."

Smarting at being called a shrimp, Kolya Kolokolchikov raised his bugle and, blowing out his cheeks, sounded a furious retreat. The two envoys then departed in dignified silence under the inquisitive stares of the boys strung along the fence.

"What's this, anyway?" said Kvakin, fingering the envelope and looking at the gaping boys. "Here we were, living quiet and peaceful, and then — bango! No, fellas, I can't make head or tail of it!"

He tore open the envelope and, perched as he was on the fence, began to read:

"'To Mikhail Kvakin, Chief of the Gang of Garden Thieves.' This is for me," he explained in a loud voice. "Full title and everything. 'And his,'" he continued, "'ill-famed assistant Peter Pyatakov, alias The Figure.' That's you," he said to The Figure with satisfaction. "Boy, that's some word, 'Ill-famed!' Too decent, if you ask me; they could have called a fool by a simpler name. 'And also to all the members of their infamous band —

an *ultimatum*.' Now what could that be?" sneered Kvakin. "I guess it's a swearword or something."

"That's an international word. They're going to beat us up," explained the close-cropped Alyosha, who was standing next to The Figure.

"Then why don't they say so!" said Kvakin. "Now we come to Article One:

" 'Whereas you make night raids on the gardens of peaceful inhabitants, not sparing houses bearing our sign — a red star — or even those bearing a star with the black border of mourning, we order you, you sneaking scoundrels:'

"Can you beat it? Just listen to how those dogs swear!" continued Kvakin, forcing a smile. "And look at all the fancy words and commas that's coming! Boy!

" 'Not later than tomorrow morning you, Mikhail Kvakin, and that ill-begotten creature, The Figure, are to appear at the place indicated by our messengers, with a list of all the members of your infamous band.

" 'In the event of your refusal, we reserve for ourselves unhampered freedom of action.'

"What do they mean by freedom?" Kvakin said. "We never locked them up anywhere, did we?"

"That's just an international word. They're

going to beat us up," the close-cropped Alyosha again explained.

"Then why don't they say so?" Kvakin said with annoyance. "Too bad Geika's gone; looks like he hasn't cried for a long time."

"He won't cry," Alyosha said. "His brother's a sailor."

"So what?"

"His father was a sailor too. He won't cry."

"What's it to you, anyway?"

"Well, my uncle's a sailor too."

"Aw, cut it out, will you!" Kvakin flared up. "Stop blabbing about his father, his brother and your uncle, and talk sense. Better let your hair grow, Alyosha — looks like you've got a sun-stroke. And what are you mumbling about?" he asked The Figure.

"We've got to catch those messengers tomorrow and then give that Timur and his gang a licking," said The Figure shortly and sullenly. He was angry about the ultimatum.

They left it at that.

Withdrawing to the shade of the chapel, the chief and his assistant stopped near a painting of a pack of energetic and muscular devils dragging howling and resisting sinners into hell. Kvakin said to The Figure:

"Look here, did you climb into the garden where the girl whose father was killed lives?"

"I did. What about it?"

"You see, it's like this," Kvakin muttered glumly, poking his finger at the mural. "I don't give a damn for Timur's signs and I can beat him up any day...."

"Okay," agreed The Figure. "So what're you poking your finger at the devils for?"

"Because," replied Kvakin with a crooked grin, "even though you're a friend of mine, you're more like this fat old dirty devil than anything else I know."

\*

In the morning the milkwoman did not find her three steady customers at home. It was too late to go to the market, so lifting her milk can onto her shoulder she set out on a round of the houses.

She trudged from door to door with no success until she finally reached Timur's cottage.

She heard a deep, pleasant voice singing in the yard. That meant the owners were in and she might have some luck there.

As she came through the gate the old woman sang out:

"Milk, anyone want milk here?"

"One quart!" replied a bass voice.

Lowering her can to the ground, the milkwoman turned around and saw a grizzled and

tattered lame old man come out from behind the bushes brandishing a curved sword.

"I was sayin', man, did you want any milk?" the milkwoman asked, backing away in alarm. "Goodness me, how rough you look! What are you tryin' to do, cut the grass with that sword?"

"One quart. The pitcher's on the table," the old man barked, sticking his sword into the ground.

"You ought to buy a scythe, man," the milkwoman continued, hastily pouring the milk into the pitcher and glancing distrustfully at the old man, "an' throw that sword away. You can scare a simple body to death with a sword like that."

"How much?" the old man asked, thrusting his hand into the pocket of his baggy trousers.

"As much as everybody else pays," replied the milkwoman. "Two-eighty a quart. I don't overcharge."

The old man rummaged about in his pocket and drew out a large, battered revolver.

"Look, you can pay later on," the milkwoman babbled, snatching up her can and making off. "Don't trouble yourself, my good man!" she went on, almost running now and glancing back over her shoulder. "I can wait for the money."

She hurried through the gate, slammed it shut and shouted out angrily from the lane:

"You ought to be put in a lunatic asylum, you old devil, an' not let to run about loose. Yes, yes! Under lock an' key in a lunatic asylum is where you belong!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders, stuffed the three-ruble bill back into his pocket and quickly hid the revolver behind his back, for the elderly gentleman, Doctor F. G. Kolokolchikov, was coming into the garden.

The doctor stalked down the gravel walk with a serious and concentrated mien, leaning on his stick. When he caught sight of the eccentric old man he coughed and adjusted his spectacles.

"Can you tell me, my good man, where I can find the owner of this cottage?" he inquired.

"I live in this cottage," the old man replied.

"In that case," said the elderly gentleman, tipping his straw hat, "perhaps you can tell me whether a certain Timur Garayev is a relative of yours."

"He is. The boy in question happens to be my nephew."

"It pains me to tell you this," began the elderly gentleman, clearing his throat and looking askance at the sword stuck into the ground, "but yesterday morning your nephew attempted to rob our house."

"What? My Timur tried to rob your house?"

"Yes, just imagine!" continued the elderly gentleman, glancing behind the old man's back and beginning to get nervous. "He tried to steal the flannel blanket I was covered with."

"Who? Timur robbed you? Stole your flannel blanket?" The old man gasped. The hand holding the revolver involuntarily fell to his side.

The elderly gentleman was now visibly alarmed. Backing toward the gate with as much dignity as he could muster, he called out:

"Of course, I wouldn't swear to it, but still the facts — the facts! My dear sir! I beg you — please do not approach me. Naturally — I have no idea why — but your appearance, your strange behaviour...."

"Look here," declared the old man, walking up to the doctor. "There must be some misunderstanding."

"My dear sir!" cried the elderly gentleman, staring hypnotized at the revolver and continuing to retreat. "Considering our age, this conversation of ours is taking a most undesirable and, I might say, undignified course."

He dashed out into the lane and hurried away, repeating:

"No, no, a most undesirable and undignified course."

The shaggy old man reached the gate just as

Olga, out for a swim in the river, came level with the agitated gentleman.

Suddenly the old man waved his arms and called to Olga to stop. At this the doctor leaped over a ditch with the agility of a goat, seized Olga's hand, and in a twinkling the two disappeared around the corner.

The old man broke into laughter. In a gay and excited mood, he tapped out a jig on his wooden leg and sang:

*But you, as you speed away,  
Cannot know what it means to stay,  
Waiting each night and day —  
Ah!*

Then he unfastened the strap at his knee, flung the wooden leg onto the grass and, tearing off his wig and beard, ran into the house.

Ten minutes later the young and debonair auto engineer George Garayev ran down the steps, wheeled his motorcycle out of the barn, called to the dog Rita to watch the house, pressed the starter, swung into the saddle and sped off to the river to find the frightened Olga.

\*

At 11 a. m. Geika and Kolya Kolokolchikov set out for the reply to the ultimatum.

"Walk straight," Geika growled at Kolya. "You've got to walk with a light and firm step. But you hop about like a chicken trying to catch a worm. Your get-up's fine — pants, shirt and everything — but still you don't look like anything. Don't get sore, now — I'm talking sense to you. Now why do you have to lick your lips? Stick your tongue back in your mouth and keep it where it belongs. . . . And what are you doing here?" Geika asked Sima Simakov, who had just popped up in their path.

"Timur sent me to act as a messenger," Simakov rattled off. "It's okay even if you don't know what it's all about. You've got your business and I've got mine. Kolya, let me blow your bugle — just once. Boy, don't you look important today? Geika, you nut! Why don't you put a pair of boots or shoes on when you go out on business? Ever see a barefoot ambassador? Well, so long — you go that way and I go this way. Be seein' you!"

"What a rattler!" Geika shook his head. "Shoots off a hundred words where four would do. Blow your bugle, Kolya, here's the fence."

"Bring up Mikhail Kvakin!" Geika told the boy whose head appeared above the fence.

"To the right, please. You'll find the gate open for you there," Kvakin called from the other side.

"Let's not go," Kolya whispered to Geika, tugging at his hand. "They'll catch us and beat us up."

"You mean all of them against us two?" Geika said contemptuously. "Blow your bugle, Kolya, as loud as you know how. The road's clear everywhere for our squad."

They walked through the rusty iron gate and found themselves facing a group of boys headed by The Figure and Kvakin.

"Let's have the answer to our letter," Geika announced firmly.

Kvakin smiled and The Figure scowled.

"Let's talk this over," Kvakin offered. "Sit down a while, what's the hurry?"

"Give us the answer to the letter," Geika demanded coldly. "We can talk afterwards."

It was strange, incomprehensible: was he acting, this straightforward, sturdy little chap in the sailor's jersey, at whose side stood the puny, now pallid bugler? Or was he actually demanding an answer, slitting his stern grey eyes and standing there barefoot and broad-shouldered, feeling that justice and power were on his side?

"Here, take it," said Kvakin, handing him a note.

Geika unfolded the sheet of paper. What he saw was a crude drawing of a thumb to a nose captioned with a swearword.

Geika calmly tore the sheet in two; not a muscle of his face moved. And at that moment the two boys were seized by the arms and legs.

They did not resist.

"We ought to beat you up for ultimatums like that," said Kvakin, coming up to Geika. "But our hearts are in the right place. We'll lock you in here till nighttime" — he pointed to the chapel — "and at night we'll clean out the garden at No. 24."

"No, you won't," replied Geika unruffled.

"We certainly will!" cried The Figure, striking Geika in the face.

"You can hit me a hundred times," said Geika. He shut his eyes tight and then opened them again. "Kolya," he grunted encouragingly, "keep a stiff upper lip. I've got a feeling there'll be a No. 1 general call signal today."

The captives were shoved into the small chapel with its closed iron shutters. Both doors were locked, bolted and barred after them.

"Well," The Figure shouted at the door through cupped palms, "how's it going to work out now, your way or ours?"

From inside came a hollow, scarcely audible answer:

"No, you bums, from now on it'll never be your way any more!"

The Figure spat in disgust.

"His brother's a sailor," the close-cropped Alyosha said morosely. "He and my uncle are on the same ship."

"So what?" The Figure asked menacingly. "Who are you, the captain or what?"

"You hit him when he couldn't use his hands. Is that fair?"

"You can have one too!" The Figure snarled and swung his fist at Alyosha.

The two grappled on the grass. The others grabbed them by the arms and legs and tried to draw them apart.

Nobody noticed Sima Simakov's face in the thick foliage of a lime tree growing near the fence.

Sima slipped to the ground and sprinted across the vegetable patches toward the river, where Timur and the boys were swimming.

\*

Olga, her head covered with a towel, was lying on the hot sandy beach reading.

Genie was in the water. Suddenly somebody came up from behind and gave her a hug.

She turned around.

"Hello," said a tall, dark-eyed girl. "Timur sent me. My name's Tanya, and I'm in his squad too. He's sorry you got into trouble with your

sister on account of him. Your sister's pretty mean, isn't she?"

"Tell him not to feel sorry," muttered Genie, reddening. "Olga isn't mean at all, she's just made that way." She clasped her hands together in a gesture of despair and added: "Oh, you sister, sister of mine! Just you wait till Dad comes home!"

They clambered out onto the steep bank a little bit to the left of the sandy beach. Here they encountered Nyura.

"Hello, recognize me?" she asked Genie in that rapid way of hers through clenched teeth. "You do? I recognized you right away. There's Timur!" She pulled off her dress and pointed to the opposite bank, which was teeming with boys. "I know who found the goat for me, and who stacked the firewood, and who gave my brother the wild strawberries. And I know you too," she said, turning to Tanya. "I once saw you sitting in your vegetable garden crying. You oughtn't cry. Doesn't do any good. Hey, stand still, you horrid thing, or I'll throw you into the water!" she cried at the goat, which was tied to a clump of bushes. "Come on, girls, let's jump in!"

Genie and Tanya exchanged glances. She was so funny, this sunburned little girl who looked like a Gypsy!

Holding hands, they went up to the edge of

the steep bank overlooking the clear, rippling, blue waters.

"Well, shall we jump?"

"Yes, let's!"

They plunged into the water.

No sooner had they come up to the surface than somebody else plopped in by their side.

It was Sima Simakov who had taken a running dive from the bank, dressed as he was, in sandals, shorts and shirt.

Tossing back his wet hair and splashing and snorting, he swam with long strokes toward the opposite bank.

"Genie!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Geika and Kolya've been trapped!"

\*

Olga strolled up the hill reading her book. Where the steep path cut across the road she came upon George standing by his motorcycle. They greeted each other.

"I was riding along when I saw you coming. So I thought I'd wait and give you a lift if you were going the same way."

"That's not true!" Olga retorted. "You were waiting for me on purpose."

"All right, rub it in," said George. "I wanted to put one over on you but it didn't work. I want to apologize for scaring you this morning. You

know, I was the lame old fellow at the gate. I was dressed for rehearsal. Climb on and I'll take you home."

Olga shook her head.

He placed a bouquet of flowers on her book. It was a nice bouquet. Olga blushed in confusion — and threw it to the ground.

George had not expected that.

"Look here," he said with chagrin. "You play and sing well, and you have nice eyes. I haven't offended you in any way. But I don't think even people of the most reinforced of reinforced concrete professions act like that."

"I don't need any flowers!" Olga said guiltily, frightened by what she had done. "I — I can come with you without flowers."

She took her seat on the leather cushion and the motorcycle sped off.

When the machine came to a fork in the road it ignored the road to the settlement and tore down the one leading to the open country.

"You've taken the wrong road," Olga shouted. "We should have gone to the right!"

"This is a better road," George replied. "It's jollier out here."

Another turn, and they roared through a rustling, shady wood. A dog left its herd to bark at them and chase the machine. But it was no use; the motorcycle was already too far away.

Then a truck came whining down the road like a heavy artillery shell in flight. When George and Olga broke through the clouds of dust they caught sight of the belching smokestacks, towers and glass and steel buildings of some strange town at the foot of a hill.

"That's our plant!" George shouted. "Three years ago I used to pick mushrooms and wild strawberries on that spot!"

Still going almost at full speed, the machine took a sharp turn.

"Now go straight!" Olga cried out. "Head straight for home!"

Suddenly the motor died down and they came to a stop.

"Just a moment," George said, jumping to the ground. "A minor breakdown."

He rolled the machine over to a birch tree by the side of the road, took out a monkey wrench and began to tinker with the motor.

"What role have you got in the opera?" Olga asked, seating herself on the grass. "Why is your get-up so stern and frightening?"

"I've got the part of an old invalid," replied George, fussing with the motor. "He's an ex-guerilla and sort of queer. He lives near the border and is obsessed by the idea that our enemies might outwit us. He's old but vigilant. Then there are the Red Army men — they're a

gay young lot and play volleyball during off-duty hours. There are all sorts of girls too."

George twisted his features into a frown and began to sing in a low voice:

Once more the moonlight floods the  
strand —

*Three sleepless nights these lonely  
rounds I go.*

*The foe is creeping up —*

*Awake, awake, beloved land!*

*I am so old and weak. Oh, woe is  
me, Oh woe!*

Then he switched to another key and chanted in imitation of the chorus:

*Compose yourself, old man.*

*Be calm.*

"What does 'be calm' mean?" Olga asked, wiping the dust from her lips with a handkerchief.

"It means," explained George, continuing to work away with his monkey wrench, "it means sleep in peace, you old fool! The men and their commanders took up their posts long ago.... Olya, did your little sister tell you about our talk?"

"She did, and I scolded her for it."

"You shouldn't have. She's a very amusing child. I said 'Oh,' and she said, 'Ho!' "

"That amusing child can make life pretty difficult," Olga said. "A boy by the name of Timur has been hanging around her. He's in with that hoodlum Kvakin. It's all I can do to keep him away from our house."

"Timur? Hm-hm," George coughed in embarrassment. "Mean to say he's in that gang? I don't believe he's that sort — not likely — oh well! Don't you worry. I'll keep him away from your house. Olya, why don't you study music? What's an engineer, anyway? I'm an engineer myself and what's the good of it?"

"Aren't you a good engineer?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" retorted George, moving closer to Olga and starting to tinker with the hub of the front wheel. "I'm not at all a bad engineer, but you play and sing so well."

"Look here, George," murmured Olga. She moved away in confusion. "I don't know what sort of engineer you are, but you certainly have a queer way of repairing your machine."

Olga gestured in imitation of his antics with the monkey wrench.

"Nothing queer about it at all. Everything's being done in the proper way." He jumped to his feet and gave the frame a couple of taps with the monkey wrench. "There you are, the job's finished. Olya, is your father an army officer?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. I'm one too."

"There's no making you out!" Olga shrugged her shoulders. "First you're an engineer, then an actor and now an army officer. Perhaps you're a flyer as well?"

"No," laughed George. "Flyers dump bombs onto people's heads from above, but we strike home through iron and concrete right here on earth."

Again the rye fields, woods and river whirled past. Soon they came to Olga's cottage.

At the noise of the motorcycle Genie skipped out onto the porch. She blushed when she saw George, but after he had sped off she went up to Olga, hugged her and said enviously:

"Ooh, how lucky you are today, Olya!"

\*

The boys at the chapel scattered in various directions after arranging to get together near the garden of house No. 24.

Only The Figure remained behind. He was perplexed and angered by the silence inside the chapel. The captives did not yell, pound on the door or respond to his shouts.

He then tried a ruse. Opening the outside door, he entered the stone-walled vestibule and held his breath.

While he was standing there with his ear

glued to the keyhole, the outer door suddenly closed with a bang, as though someone had hit it with a pole.

"Hey, who's there?" he demanded angrily, springing to the door. "Hey, cut out the tricks or I'll smack you one!"

No one replied. He heard strange voices outside. The shutters creaked as they were opened. Someone began to talk to the captives through the bars of the window.

Then the boys inside the chapel burst out laughing. The sound of that laugh made The Figure feel uneasy.

At last the outside door was thrown open. Timur, Simakov and Ladygin stood in the doorway.

"Open the second door!" Timur ordered without stirring from his place. "Open it yourself if you don't want things happening to you!"

The Figure reluctantly drew the bolt. Kolya and Geika came out of the chapel.

"Now take their place!" Timur ordered. "Get in, you viper, quick now!" he shouted, clenching his fists. "I've no time to lose."

Both doors were shut behind The Figure. A heavy bolt was shot through the iron loops and a padlock fixed to it.

Then Timur took a sheet of paper and scribbled the following on it with his blue pencil:

"Kvakin, they don't have to be watched. I locked them up and took the key. I'll come straight to the garden this evening."

They ran off. Five minutes later Kvakin came through the gate.

He read the note, fingered the lock, grinned, and retraced his steps to the gate while The Figure pounded frantically at the iron door with his fists and heels.

At the gate Kvakin turned around and muttered indifferently:

"Pound away, Geika! You'll do quite a bit of pounding before evening comes!"

Just before sundown Timur and Simakov made their way to the market square. At the edge of a straggling row of stalls where soft drinks, vegetables, tobacco, groceries and ice cream were sold, stood a rickety empty booth where cobblers worked on market days.

Timur and Simakov spent a few minutes in that booth.

At dusk the helm in the barn loft went into action. One after another the wires tightened, conveying the necessary signals to the necessary places.

Reinforcements poured in. Quite a large number of boys had already gathered — about twenty or thirty of them. And more kept creeping noiselessly through gaps in the fences.

Tanya and Nyura were sent away. Genie stayed at home too. Her job was to keep Olga from going out into the garden.

Timur stood by the helm.

"Repeat the signal over the sixth line," Simakov said anxiously, sticking his head through the window. "Can't see anybody coming from there."

Two boys were busy writing something on a piece of plywood. Ladygin's group arrived.

At last the scouts came in with reports. Kvakin's gang was assembled on the lot outside the garden of No. 24.

"Time to start," said Timur. "Get ready, boys!"

He released the wheel and pulled a rope. Slowly the squad's flag rose and ripped over the old barn in the uneven light of the moon that was shuttling in and out of the clouds. This was the signal for battle.

\*

A string of ten boys crept along the fence of No. 24. Halting in the shade, Kvakin said:

"Everybody's here but The Figure."

"He's a wise guy," someone remarked. "I'll bet he's in the garden already. He's always first."

Kvakin removed two previously loosened boards from the fence and climbed through. The others followed him. Alyosha remained in the street to keep watch.

Five heads peeped out from behind a clump of

nettles and weeds growing in the ditch on the other side of the road. Four of them disappeared again. The fifth — Kolya Kolokolchikov's — did not follow immediately, but when a hand slapped it on the crown it disappeared as well.

Alyosha, the sentry, looked around. All was quiet. He stuck his head through the hole in the fence to find out if he could hear anything.

Three boys crept out of the ditch. The next moment the sentry felt strong hands gripping his arms and legs, and before he knew it he was hurled back from the fence.

"Geika!" he muttered, raising his head. "Where'd you come from?"

"From over there," hissed Geika. "Better hold your tongue! Or I'll forget that you stood up for me."

"Okay," agreed Alyosha. "I'll keep mum." And he suddenly gave a shrill whistle.

His mouth was clapped shut at once by Geika's broad palm. Hands grabbed him by the shoulders and legs and dragged him away.

The boys in the garden heard the whistle. Kvakin, spun around, but the whistle was not repeated. He peered into the darkness. He thought he saw the bushes in the corner of the garden moving.

"Figure!" he called in a low voice. "That you hiding there, you fool?"

"Misha! Scram!" somebody suddenly shouted.  
"The owners are coming!"

But it was not the owners.

In the bushes behind him at least a dozen flashlights were switched on. They advanced quickly on the raiders, confusing and blinding them.

"Fight 'em, don't run!" cried Kvakin, reaching into his pocket for an apple and hurling it at the lights. "Pull out the flashlights and their arms too! It's Timur on the warpath!"

"Timka there and Simka here!" Simakov snapped as he leapt out of a bush.

Another dozen boys bore down on them from the rear and flanks.

"Oho!" yelled Kvakin. "They've got a regular army here! Run for the fence, fellas!"

The trapped and panic-stricken band made for the fence. Jostling and bumping into one another, the boys tumbled out into the road and fell straight into the arms of Ladygin and Geika.

The moon hid behind a cloud. Voices issued out of the darkness:

"Lemme go!"

"Cut it out!"

"Hands off! Hey!"

"Quiet, everybody!" Timur's voice rang out.  
"Don't hurt the prisoners! Where's Geika?"

"Here I am!"

"Lead them off."

"What if they stall?"

"Take 'em by the hands and feet and haul 'em along with ceremony like an icon."

"Lemme go, you rats!" someone whined.

"Who was that?" Timur demanded furiously.

"Aha, you can dish it out but you can't take it! Geika, give the order and get a move on!"

The prisoners were led to the empty booth on the fringe of the market square and pushed inside one after another.

"Bring Kvakin over," Timur ordered.

Kvakin was led up.

"Ready?" asked Timur.

"All ready."

The last prisoner was shoved into the booth and the door was bolted and locked.

"Run along," Timur told Kvakin. "You're just funny. Nobody's afraid of you and nobody needs you."

Kvakin stood looking blankly at the ground, expecting a beating.

"Run along," Timur repeated. "Take this key and let your friend The Figure out of the chapel."

Kvakin did not move.

"Let the fellas out or lemme in with them," he growled.

"No," said Timur. "That's over and done with."

You're finished with them and they're finished with you for good."

A cacophony of whistles and catcalls followed Kvakin as he slowly walked off, hunching his shoulders. Ten paces away he stopped and straightened up.

"I'll beat the life out of you!" he shouted savagely at Timur. "I'll lick you singlehanded. To a pulp!" After which he plunged into the darkness.

"Ladygin, you and your five men can go," said Timur. "What's your assignment?"

"No. 22, Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya — stack the logs."

"Okay. Get to work!"

A whistle blew at the station nearby. A suburban train had pulled in and the arrivals would soon begin to come off the platform. Timur hurried.

"Simakov, you and your five — what's your job?"

"No. 38, Malaya Petrakovskaya." He added with a laugh, "Our job's the same as usual: buckets, the barrel and water. Hip! Hip! S'long!"

"Okay, get to work! Well, people are coming this way now. The rest can go home. Quick now!"

\*

As the arrivals trickled onto the square an infernal clatter broke out. They stopped in alarm. Another outburst of banging and yelling followed. Lights went on in the windows of the houses in the neighbourhood. Somebody switched on the light over the stalls, and the crowd saw the following notice over the clamouring booth:

*Passers-by, don't take pity!*

*Inside are people who sneak at night into the gardens of peaceful residents and steal apples. The key to the padlock is behind this notice. The person who releases the prisoners is requested first to see whether he has a relative or friend among them.*

It is late at night and the black-bordered red star on the gate is invisible. But it is there.

Two ropes are let down from a branch of a tree in the garden of the house where the fair-haired little girl lives. A boy climbs down the rough trunk, fastens a board to the ropes and sits on it to see whether the new swing — for swing it is — is strong enough.

The stout branch creaks a bit, the leaves rustle and stir. A bird, disturbed from its slumbers, twitters and flies off. It is quite late. Olga has gone to bed long ago. Genie is asleep, and so

are the boy's comrades: the jolly Simakov, the taciturn Ladygin, the droll Kolya. Brave Geika, of course, is tossing about in his bed and mumbling in his sleep.

The clock in the watchtower strikes the quarter hour: "A day's passed — a deed's done! Ding-dong! One, two!"

Yes, it is quite late.

The boy gets off the swing, searches in the grass and picks up a heavy bouquet of wild flowers.

Genie gathered them.

He tiptoes softly up the steps of the moonlit porch so as not to wake and frighten the sleepers, and lovingly places the bouquet on the top step. It is Timur.

\*

On a Sunday morning the Young Communist League arranged a grand carnival and concert in the park to celebrate the anniversary of the victory of the Red Army at Lake Hassan in the Far East.

The girls had run off to the carnival grounds early in the morning. Olga quickly ironed her blouse and then took stock of the wardrobe. When she shook out Genie's frock a slip of paper fell out of the pocket.

Olga picked it up and read:

"Little girl, don't be afraid of anybody at

home. Everything's okay and I won't tell anybody anything. Timur."

What wouldn't he tell anybody? What should she be afraid of? What sort of secret was that sly, close-mouthed child hiding from her? No! An end had to be put to it. When Dad left he had said.... She must act quickly and firmly.

George tapped at the window.

"Olya," he exclaimed, "you've got to help me! A delegation's come around — they want me to sing at the concert. Today's such a day — I couldn't very well refuse. I want you to accompany me on your accordion."

"Yes — but why don't you get a pianist?" Olga said in surprise. "Why do you want an accordion?"

"Olya, I don't want a pianist, I want you to play! It'll work out fine. May I jump in through the window? Put the iron away and take out the accordion. Here, I've got it out myself. All you have to do is press the keys and I'll sing."

"Look here, George," said Olga, pouting. "After all, you really don't have to climb in through the window when there are doors."

\*

It was noisy in the park. Cars filled with merry-makers kept rolling up. Trucks drove up laden with sandwiches, buns, soft drinks, sausage,

candy and cookies. An array of blue-uniformed ice cream vendors spread out over the grounds.

Phonographs screeched in every imaginable key on the lawns where picnickers were laying out their lunches. The bands blared.

At the entrance to the concert hall the old doorman was arguing with a line repairman who was trying to enter with all his tools — monkey wrenches, straps, spikes and all.

"Listen, man, you can't go in with those tools. Today's a holiday. You go home first, wash up and put on some decent clothes."

"But it's a free performance, isn't it? I don't need a ticket!"

"Makes no difference. They're singing in there. You'll be dragging in your telegraph pole next. You move along too, citizen," he said to another man. "Can't you hear there's singing in there — music? And you've got a bottle sticking out of your pocket!"

"But look here, old man," the other hiccuped. "I've got to — I'm the tenor!"

"Get along with you, you tenor," retorted the old doorman. He pointed to the repairman. "This bass over here isn't making a rumpus, and I'd advise you to be quiet too."

Genie, who had been told by the boys that Olga had gone backstage with her accordion, fidgeted nervously in her seat.

At last George and Olga came onto the stage. Genie was on pins and needles. She was afraid the audience would laugh at Olga.

But nobody laughed.

George and Olga were so sweet, young and gay standing there on the stage that Genie felt like rushing up and hugging them both.

Olga picked up her accordion.

A deep line furrowed George's forehead. He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head. He was an old man now, and in a low, sonorous voice he began to sing:

*Three nights I have not slept. I always seem  
to hear,  
Disturbing noises in the rushes and the  
water down below,  
My fingers grip my gun. My heart is filled  
with fear,  
As when we faced a battle twenty years  
ago.  
But if, through bitter fate, I am destined  
once again,  
To meet the foreign hirelings in the service  
of the foe,  
Though I am old and grey, I shall fight as I  
did then,  
And like twenty years ago, no mercy will I  
show.*

"How lovely! Poor brave old fellow! How well he sings," Genie murmured to herself. "That's the way! Play, Olya! What a pity Dad isn't here to see you play!"

After the concert George and Olga strolled hand in hand through the park.

"It's all very well," Olga was saying, "but I don't know where Genie is."

"She was standing on her seat and yelling 'Bravo, bravo!'" said George. "Then —" George faltered, "then a boy came up to her and they disappeared."

"What boy?" Olga asked anxiously. "George, you're older than me. Tell me what to do with her. Look, I found this note this morning."

George frowned thoughtfully as he read the note.

"'Don't be afraid' means 'don't obey,'" Olga said. "Oh, if I could only lay my hands on that boy, would I give him a piece of my mind!"

Olga tucked the note away. They were silent for several moments. But the music was so gay and everybody about them so merry that they soon linked hands again and resumed their stroll.

Suddenly at a crossing they bumped into another couple walking along hand in hand just as amiably as they. It was Timur and Genie.

Both couples blushed and greeted each other politely without stopping.

"That's him!" said Olga, clutching desperately at George's sleeve. "That's the boy."

"Yes," said George, abashed. "And the worst part of it is that he happens to be Timur, my slapdash nephew."

"And you — you knew!" Olga bristled. "And you didn't tell me a word!"

Shaking off his hand she ran down the walk. But neither Timur nor Genie was in sight. She turned down a crooked little path and finally came upon Timur standing in front of The Figure and Kvakin.

"Look here," she said, coming up close to him. "It's not enough that you sneak into gardens and break trees, even the old women's and the little girl's who lost her father. It's not enough that even the dogs run away from you. You had to go and turn my sister against me too. You wear a Pioneer tie but you're nothing but a scoundrel!"

Timur turned pale.

"That's not true," he said. "You don't understand."

Olga made an impatient gesture and ran off to find Genie.

Timur stood there and said nothing.

The puzzled Figure and Kvakin were also silent.

"Well, Commissar?" said Kvakin. "I see you have your nasty moments too."

"Yes, Chief," replied Timur, slowly raising his

eyes. "I don't feel very happy right now. I'd rather you caught me and beat me up than have to listen to this on your account."

"Why'd you keep quiet?" Kvakin sniggered. "You could've said it was us and not you. We were here all the time."

"Sure!" agreed The Figure gleefully. "You could've said that and we'd have given you a sock on the jaw for it."

But Kvakin, who had not expected such backing from The Figure, stared coldly at his friend. Meanwhile Timur slowly walked off, slapping the tree trunks with his hand as he went.

"He's proud," said Kvakin quietly. "Wants to cry, but won't."

"Let's give him something to cry about," said The Figure. He hurled a fir cone at Timur.

"He's proud," Kvakin repeated hoarsely. "And you — you're a skunk!" And he swung his fist at The Figure's head.

The Figure gaped, then let out a howl and bolted. Kvakin ran after him and punched him twice in the back.

At last Kvakin stopped, picked up his cap, hit it against his knee to shake off the dust, sought out an ice cream vendor, bought a cone, leaned against a tree, and, breathing heavily, bit greedily into the ice cream.

Timur found Geika and Sima near the rifle range.

"Timur!" Sima called. "Your uncle's looking for you and he seems pretty mad."

"I know. I'm going home."

"Will you come back?"

"I don't know."

"Timur!" said Geika with sudden tenderness, taking his comrade's hand. "What's the matter? We haven't done anyone any harm. And you know that when a man's in the right...."

"Yes, I know — he's not afraid of anything in the world. But it hurts just the same."

Timur strode away.

Meanwhile Genie ran up to Olya, who was carrying her accordion home.

"Olya!"

"Go away!" said Olga without looking at her sister. "I don't want to talk to you any more. I'm going to Moscow right away, and you can gad about till dawn with whomever you like for all I care."

"But Olya...."

"I don't want to talk to you. The day after tomorrow we'll move back to Moscow. And we'll wait for Dad there."

"Yes! Dad, and not you — he'll learn all about it!" Choking with tears of rage, she ran off in search of Timur.

She found Geika and Simakov and asked them if they had seen Timur.

"He's been called home," Geika said. "His uncle's mad at him on account of you."

Genie, now beside herself, stamped her foot and clenched her fists.

"That's how people come to grief — for nothing!"

She flung her arms around the trunk of a birch tree. Just then Tanya and Nyura rushed up to her.

"Genie!" cried Tanya. "What's the matter? Genie, come on, we've got to hurry. An accordion player has come and the dances have begun — the girls are already there."

They shook her and hugged her and dragged her over to the circle where frocks and blouses bright as flowers could be seen whirling round and round.

"Genie, don't cry!" said Nyura, speaking quickly, as usual, through clenched teeth. "Grandma hits me sometimes but I never cry! Come on, girls, let's get inside! Here goes!"

"Here goes!" Genie chimed in.

Breaking through the circle, they whirled and spun in gay abandon.

\*

As soon as Timur came in, his uncle called him.

"I'm sick of your night adventures," George began. "Sick of your signals, buzzers and ropes. What was that crazy business with the blanket?"

"That was a mistake."

"Some mistake! And I'll ask you to leave that girl alone; her sister doesn't like you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose you deserve it. What sort of notes have you been writing? What sort of strange dates have you been keeping in the garden at dawn? Olya says you're making a hoodlum of the girl."

"She's lying," retorted Timur indignantly. "A YCL'er, too. If she doesn't know what it's all about she could ask me. I'd tell her."

"Good. But so far you haven't told her anything, and I forbid you to go near their house. And, in general, if you don't watch out I'll ship you back to your mother instanter."

He turned to go out.

"Uncle," Timur called after him. "When you were a kid what did you do? What did you play at?"

"We? We used to run around, jump, climb roofs. Sometimes we used to fight too. But our games were all quite simple and everybody could understand them."

To punish Genie, Olga left for Moscow that evening without saying another word to her.

She had nothing to do in Moscow, so she looked in on her girl friend instead of going straight home. It was almost ten by the time she got home.

She opened the door, turned on the light and gave a start: a telegram was pinned to the door.

Olga scanned the short message. It was from Dad.

\*

Toward evening, when the trucks began to leave the park, Genie and Tanya ran home. Genie wanted to change into sneakers for a game of volleyball.

Just as she was tying her shoelaces the mother of the fair-haired little girl entered the room. The little girl lay asleep in her arms.

The woman was crestfallen when she learned that Olga was not at home.

"I wanted to leave my daughter here," she said. "I didn't know your sister wasn't at home. The train is coming in at night, you see, and I have to be in Moscow to meet my mother."

"Leave her with me," said Genie. "What if Olga isn't here — I'm somebody, ain't I? Put her on my bed. I can sleep on the other one."

"She's sleeping quietly now and won't wake up till morning," the mother said, brightening. "All you have to do is straighten her pillow now and again."

They undressed the little girl and put her to bed. Her mother left. Genie pulled back the curtains so that she could see the bed from outside, and closed the door. Then the two girls dashed off to play volleyball, first having settled that they would take turns running back to look at the child.

They had no sooner gone than a mailman came up to the porch. He knocked for a long time, and since there was no answer he crossed over to the neighbours to inquire whether the owners of the cottage had moved back to town.

"No," the neighbour said. "The girl was here a moment ago. I can give her the telegram."

The neighbour signed for the telegram, put it in his pocket, sat down on a bench, lit his pipe, and waited for Genie.

An hour and a half later the mailman came round again.

"Here's another one," he said. "What's all the fuss about? Be a good fellow and sign for this telegram too."

The neighbour signed the book. It was quite dark by now. He opened the gate, went up the steps to the porch and glanced through the

window. Inside, a little girl was asleep, with a tawny kitten curled up by her head. That meant the owners were not far away. He opened the transom and shoved the two telegrams through. They fell neatly to the windowsill, where Genie was certain to notice them right away.

But Genie did not notice them. She came in, adjusted the child's pillow by the light of the moon, swept the kitten off, undressed and went to bed. She lay for a long time thinking. So that's how life could be! It wasn't her fault, and it didn't seem to be Olga's either, yet there they were, having their first big quarrel.

Genie was hurt. She could not fall asleep. She decided to eat a slice of bread and jam. Jumping out of bed, she ran over to the cupboard, switched on the light — and saw the telegrams on the windowsill.

Her heart missed a beat. With trembling fingers she tore open the telegrams.

The first read:

"Will stopover enroute midnight to three in morning. Wait for me city apartment."

The second read:

"Come immediately. Dad will be in town tonight. Olga."

Genie glanced at the clock with a sinking heart. It was a quarter to twelve. Pulling on her dress and picking up the sleeping child, she

dashed out onto the porch like one possessed. Then she changed her mind. She put the child back in bed, sprang out into the road and made for the milkwoman's house. There she pounded on the door with her fists and heels until the neighbour poked her head out of the window.

"What are you banging for?" the neighbour asked in a sleepy voice: "What's the big idea?"

"Please, there's no big idea," Genie pleaded. "I must see Aunt Masha, the milkwoman. I have to leave the baby with her."

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed the neighbour, shutting her window with a bang. "The old woman's been visiting her brother in the village since morning."

A train pulling into the station blew its whistle. Genie ran back into the road and bumped into the elderly gentleman, the doctor.

"Pardon me!" she burst out. "Can you tell me what train that is?"

The old gentleman produced his watch.

"The twenty-three fifty-five," he replied. "The last train to Moscow."

"How do you mean, the last?" whispered Genie, a lump rising in her throat. "When does the next one leave?"

"The next one leaves in the morning, at three-forty. What's the matter with you, child?" he

inquired solicitously, catching the reeling girl by the shoulder. "You aren't crying, surely? Can I help you in any way?"

"No, no, you can't!" said Genie, holding back her tears and rushing away. "Nobody in the world can help me now!"

\*

At home she flung herself down on her bed, but the next moment she sprang up and glared at the sleeping child. Then, remembering herself, she straightened the little girl's blanket and whisked the tawny kitten off the pillow.

She switched on the lights on the porch, in the kitchen and in the room, sat down on the sofa and began to rock her head. She sat that way for a long time, thinking about nothing in particular. She accidentally touched the accordion lying by her side. Lifting it up mechanically, she began to finger the keys. A sad, solemn melody filled the room. Genie abruptly laid the accordion aside and went over to the window. Her shoulders were quivering.

No! She could not stay there alone and bear the torture a minute longer. She lit a candle and stumbled through the garden toward the barn.

There was the loft, with its ropes, map, sacks and flags. She lit the lantern, went over to the

wheel, found the right rope, hooked it on, and then jerked the wheel.

\*

Timur was fast asleep when Rita touched his shoulder with her paw. He did not feel the gentle push. Rita then fastened her teeth into the blanket and dragged it onto the floor.

Timur sat up.

"What's the matter?" he asked, perplexed. "Anything wrong?"

The dog gazed into his eyes, wagged her tail and tossed her head. At that moment Timur heard the little bronze bell tinkling.

He went out onto the porch and picked up the receiver, wondering who could want him at that time of night.

"Yes, this is Timur at the phone. Who is it? You? Is that you, Genie?"

At first Timur listened calmly. Then his lips began to move and the blood rushed to his face. He was breathing hard.

"And only for three hours?" he asked agitatedly. "Genie, you're not crying, are you? I can hear you — you *are* crying. You mustn't! Don't. I'll be over right away!"

He hung up and snatched a timetable from the shelf.

"Yes, there it is, the last one's at 23:55. The next one leaves at 3:40." He stood there biting

his lips. "Too late! Couldn't anything be done? No! Too late!"

But a red star flashed day and night over the gate of Genie's house. He had lit it himself, with his own hand, and its rays glittered straight and sharp before his eyes.

An army commander's daughter was in trouble! An army commander's daughter was caught in a trap!

He dressed hastily and ran out. A few minutes later he was standing on the porch of the old gentleman's cottage. The light was still on in the doctor's room. Timur knocked at the door. It was opened by the surprised doctor.

"What is it?" he asked drily.

"I wanted to see you," replied Timur.

"Me?" The old gentleman reflected a moment, then opened the door wide with a flourish and said, "In that case, please come in."

They did not talk long.

"That's all we've been doing," Timur wound up with flashing eyes. "That's all we've been doing and that's how we've been playing. That's why I need your Kolya now."

The old man rose without a word. He took Timur abruptly by the chin, tilted back his head, looked into his eyes, and then left the room.

He entered Kolya's bedroom and tugged at the boy's shoulder.

"Get up," he said. "You're wanted."

"I didn't do anything," Kolya babbled, his eyes rolling in fear. "Honest, Grandpa, I didn't do anything."

"Get up," the old gentleman repeated drily. "Your comrade has come for you."

\*

Genie was sitting on a pile of hay in the loft, arms clasped around her knees, waiting for Timur. But instead of Timur, what should come poking through the window but Kolya Kolokolchikov's tousled head!

"You?" Genie exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," replied Kolya in a low, frightened voice. "I was sleeping. He came. I got up. He sent me. He told me to tell you to come down to the gate."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I'm dizzy myself. I can't figure it out, Genie."

\*

There was no one to ask permission of. His uncle was in Moscow. Timur lit a lantern, picked up an axe, called the dog, and went out into the garden. He stopped in front of the door of the shed. His eyes shifted from his axe to the pad-

lock. Yes! He knew that it was wrong to do such a thing, but there was no other way out. A well-aimed stroke sent the padlock flying, and he wheeled the motorcycle out of the shed.

"Rita!" he exclaimed sadly, kneeling to kiss the dog on the nose. "Don't be angry! I couldn't do anything else."

\*

Genie and Kolya were waiting at the gate. A light bore down on them swiftly from the distance. They heard the chugging of a motor, then squinted and backed up against the fence as a glaring headlight rushed up. The light suddenly went out, the motor was shut off and Timur popped up before them.

"Kolya," he began, without saying hello or asking any questions. "You stay here and watch the sleeping girl. You'll answer for her to the whole squad. Genie, hop on. We're off! To Moscow!"

Genie squealed at the top of her voice, hugged Timur tight and kissed him.

"Hop on, Genie, hop on!" Timur shouted, trying to look severe. "Hold on tight! Off we go! Forward, we're off!"

The motor snorted, the horn honked and soon the red tail light was lost from view.

Kolya, completely dazed, picked up a stick,

and, holding it as though it were a rifle, tramped around the brightly lit cottage.

"Yes," he muttered, pacing importantly up and down. "A soldier's life is certainly tough! No peace, night or day!"

\*

It was getting on for three in the morning. Colonel Alexandrov was sitting at a table on which was a tea kettle that had grown cold, and some sausage, cheese and bread.

"I'll be going in half an hour," he said to Olga. "Pity I didn't get a chance to see Genie. Olya, are you crying?"

"I don't know why she hasn't come. I'm so sorry for her, she wanted to see you so much. Now she'll go crazy altogether. And she's crazy enough as it is!"

"Olya," said her father, getting up. "I'm not certain. I can't believe that Genie would mix with a bad crowd, that she could be spoiled or that anyone could order her about. No! That isn't like her!"

"There you go!" said Olga reproachfully. "All you have to do is tell her that. As it is she keeps harping on the fact that she takes after you. But nothing of the sort! She climbed onto the roof and let a rope down through the chimney. Just as I was about to start ironing the iron hopped out of

my hand and went sailing up the chimney. Dad, when you left she had four dresses. Two are already in tatters. She grew out of the third and I won't let her wear the fourth. I made her three new dresses myself but she just ruins them. She's always covered with scratches and black and blue marks. And when you talk to her she purses her lips and opens her blue eyes wide. Of course, everybody thinks she's a delicate flower. But just try and touch her! Some flower! You'll just prick your fingers on her. Dad, don't you go thinking she takes after you. If you tell her that she'll dance on a chimney three days straight!"

"All right," agreed her father, giving her a hug. "I'll talk to her. I'll write her a letter. But you mustn't be too strict with her, Olya. Tell her I love her dearly, that I think of her, that we'll soon be back and that she mustn't cry about me, because she's the daughter of an army commander."

"She'll cry all the same," said Olga, nestling close to him. "I'm also an army commander's daughter, and I'll cry too."

Her father glanced at the clock, walked over to the mirror, put on his belt and straightened his tunic.

Suddenly the outside door opened and shut with a bang. The hangings over the doorway

were pulled aside and Genie appeared, her shoulders hunched forward as though she were about to make a leap.

But instead of crying out or springing forward she glided noiselessly across the room and buried her face on her father's chest without uttering a sound.

Her forehead was spattered with mud, her crumpled dress was stained.

"Genie, where've you come from?" Olga asked anxiously. "How'd you get here?"

Without turning her head, Genie waved her hand, as much as to say: "Wait a moment! Leave me alone! Don't ask questions!"

Genie's father picked her up, sat down on the sofa and took her in his lap. He looked at her face and wiped her spattered forehead with his palm.

"Fine, Genie! Good girl!"

"But you're all covered with mud — your face is black! How did you get here?" Olga asked again.

Genie pointed to the hangings at the door, and Olga saw Timur standing there.

He was pulling off his leather gloves. His temple was smeared with yellow grease. His face was moist and tired, the face of a workingman who has done his job well. He nodded his head in greeting.

"Dad!" cried Genie, jumping from her father's lap and running over to Timur. "Don't you believe anyone! They don't know anything. This is Timur — my very good comrade."

Her father rose and heartily shook Timur's hand. A triumphant smile flitted over Genie's face. She flashed a searching look at Olga, who, still quite baffled, went up to Timur:

"Well, hello, then. . . ."

\*

Soon the clock struck three.

"Dad," Genie said anxiously. "Are you going already? Our clock is fast."

"No, Genie, that's the correct time."

"Dad, your watch is fast too." She ran over to the telephone and dialed the time. A measured metallic voice answered:

"The time is now four minutes past three."

Genie glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed.

"It's fast, but only by one minute. Dad, take us to the station with you; we'll see you off."

"Sorry, Genie, I can't. I'll be much too busy."

"Why? You've got your ticket already, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"In the sleeper?"

"Yes, in the sleeper."

"Oh, how I'd love to travel far, far away with you in the sleeper!"

\*

It was not a regular station but a small platform, like those at Moscow's freight yards, the Sortirovochnaya, for example. There were tracks, switches, trains and cars — but no passengers. An armoured train was drawn up at the platform. An iron window opened, and for a second the face of the engineer was visible against the light of the flames inside.

Genie's father, Colonel Alexandrov, stood on the platform in his leather coat. A lieutenant came up to him, saluted and said:

"Comrade Colonel, may we start?"

"Yes!" The colonel glanced at his watch: three fifty-three. The orders were to leave at three fifty-three. Colonel Alexandrov went up to his car and looked about him. It was growing light, but the sky was overcast. He turned the moist handle and the heavy door opened. As he placed his foot on the step he smiled and said to himself:

"In the sleeper?"

"Yes, in the sleeper."

The heavy steel door shut behind him with a thud.

Smoothly, without jerking or creaking, the

armoured giant went into motion and picked up speed.

The locomotive glided past, followed by the gun turrets. Moscow was left behind. A mist rose up. The stars faded away. Day was breaking.

\*

Finding both Timur and the motorcycle gone when he returned from town in the morning, George resolved to send Timur back to his mother.

He had sat down to write a letter when he glanced through the window and saw a Red Army man coming up the gravel walk.

The Red Army man produced an envelope.

"Comrade Garayev?" he asked.

"Yes."

"George Alexeyevich?"

"Yes."

"Please sign for this envelope."

The Red Army man left. George inspected the envelope and whistled significantly.

Yes! Here it was, what he had been waiting for so long!

He opened the envelope, read the message inside and then crumpled up the letter he had begun to write. Now he did not have to ship Timur off, but instead send a wire to the boy's mother asking her to come out to the country.

Just then Timur entered the room. The infuriated George brought his fist down on the table. In Timur's wake came Olga and Genie.

"Quiet, please!" said Olga. "There's no need to shout or bang the table. It's not Timur's fault. It's your fault, and mine too."

"That's right," said Genie. "Don't you dare shout at him. Olya, don't touch the table. That revolver of theirs makes an awful noise when it goes off."

George looked at Genie, then at the revolver, then at the chipped clay ashtray. He began to see the light.

"So it was you who slept here that night, Genie?" he said.

"Yes, it was I. Olya, tell the man all about it while Timur and I get some kerosene and a cloth and clean up the machine."

\*

Olga was sitting on the porch the following day when an army officer came in through the gate. He walked with a confident stride, like a man returning to his own home. Olga, perplexed, rose to meet him.

George stood in front of her in the uniform of a captain of the tank forces.

"What's this?" Olga asked softly. "A new role in your opera?"

"No," replied George. "I've dropped in to say goodbye. This isn't a new role — it's just a new uniform."

"Is this," Olga asked, pointing to his insignia and blushing slightly, "what you meant the other day when you said, 'We strike home through iron and concrete?'"

"Yes, this is it. Sing me something, Olya, something for me to take away on my long, long journey."

He sat down. Olga picked up her accordion.

*Pilots, Bombardiers!  
Flying cavaliers!  
Winging through the heavens  
Over land and sea.  
When will you return?  
You may linger long,  
But be sure to come,  
Whenever that may be.  
Think of me where'er you are,  
Be it near, or be it far,  
Over polar spaces, or a foreign shore.  
I shall still be waiting here,  
'Til your star-tipped wings appear,  
Just as true and faithful as I was before.*

"There," she said. "But it's all about flyers. I don't know anything as nice about tankmen."

"It doesn't matter," George said. "See if you can't find a nice word for me without music."

As Olga was lost in thought, seeking the right nice word, she gazed quietly and intently into his grey, no longer laughing, eyes.

\*

Genie, Timur and Tanya were in the garden.

"Listen," suggested Genie. "George is leaving. Let's get the whole squad to see him off. Let's send out the No. 1 general call signal. Won't there be a commotion, though!"

"No, better not," Timur said.

"Why not?"

"Better not. We didn't see anyone else off like that."

"Oh, all right, if we can't, we won't," agreed Genie. "You sit here while I go get a drink."

When she left Tanya burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" asked Timur.

Tanya laughed all the louder.

"There's a clever girl for you! Sly one, our Genie! 'I'll go get a drink,' she says!"

"'Ten-shun!'" Genie's voice rang out triumphantly from the loft. "Here goes No. 1 general call signal!"

"She's mad!" Timur sprang up. "A hundred kids will come tearing in! What are you doing?!"

But the heavy wheel had already creaked and turned, the ropes had jerked and pulled: "three-stop, three-stop, stop!" And under the roofs of sheds, in attics and in chicken coops the signal buzzers, bottles, tin cans and rattles rang, banged and clattered.

If not a hundred, at least fifty youngsters came charging into the garden in response to the familiar signal.

"Olya!" Genie flew up onto the porch. "We're going to see George off too! There's a lot of us. Take a look."

"Oho!" exclaimed George in surprise. "You've got a big squad there. Big enough to be loaded onto a train and sent off to the front."

"We can't!" sighed Genie, repeating Timur's words. "All the army chiefs have strict orders to kick out all the kids. Such a pity too! I could also fit in somewhere — take part in a battle, in an attack. Machine guns on the forward positions! F-i-i-r-rst!"

"F-i-i-r-rst braggart in the world!" Olya teased. She fixed the strap of the accordion over her shoulder and said:

"Well, if we're going to see him off, let's do it with music!"

They trooped out into the road. Olga played her accordion, and an orchestra of bottles, tin

cans, glass jars and sticks stepped out in front and struck up a lively accompaniment.

They tramped down the green streets, their ranks growing as they marched along. At first people could not understand what all the noise and the singing was about. But as soon as they were told they smiled, and called out their wishes for a happy journey.

As they approached the platform an army train swept by.

The first cars were full of Red Army men. The crowd waved and called out to them. Then came flatcars with a whole forest of green-shafted army carts. Then boxcars with horses tossing their manes and chewing their hay were also greeted with "hurrahs." Finally came a flatcar bearing a large, angular object covered over with grey tarpaulin. Standing by it and swaying with the motion of the train was a sentry.

The troop train disappeared and a passenger train pulled in. Timur said goodbye to his uncle.

Olga went up to George.

"Well, goodbye!" she said. "Will it be for long?"

He shook his head and gripped her hand.

"I don't know. As fortune will have it."

The whistle blew. The orchestra blared. The train pulled out.

Olga stood lost in thought.

In Genie's eyes there shone a great happiness, and she herself did not know why.

Timur was disturbed but he masked his emotions.

"Well," he said in a slightly changed voice, "now I'm all alone." And bracing his shoulders, he added, "However, my Mom will be arriving here tomorrow."

"What about me?" Genie shouted. "And what about them?" She pointed to his comrades. "And this?" She pointed to his red star.

"Don't worry!" Olga said to Timur, shaking herself out of her reverie. "You've always thought about others, and they'll do the same by you."

Timur raised his head.

Manly, upright boy that he was, he answered exactly as might have been expected.

He swept his eyes over his comrades, smiled, and said:

"I see everybody feels fine. Then I feel fine too!"





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# ERRATA

<i>Page</i>	<i>Line</i>	<i>Reads</i>	<i>Should read</i>
46	7th line from top	...with out last shells...	...with our last shells...
110	4th and 3rd lines from bottom	...Consantinople!	...Constantinople!
158	13th line from top	...any one our men...	...any one of our men...
201	2nd line from top	...sayng a word...	...saying a word...
364	11th line from bottom	...to go the tai-ga...	...to go to the taiga...
367	15th line from top	...or a least a...	...or at least a...
397	5th line from top	...to shlt up...	...to shut up...
537	14th line from top	...it was ou who...	...it was you who...



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